be brave and kiss the girl

by FateChica

Summary

El Hopper: beautiful, sweet, and instantly one of the most popular girls in the Hawkins’ High junior class when she moves there after her dad takes the job of Police Chief for the small town. Mike Wheeler: king of the nerds, A/V club president, and completely invisible to girls.

Naturally, Mike notices the new girl - how can he not when she’s the most beautiful girl he’s ever seen in his entire short life? But she’s so far out of his league, it’s not even worth dreaming about. So it’s completely and utterly confusing to him when El takes a lot more than a polite interest in him.

El, for her part, is instantly smitten with the cute nerd with gorgeous eyes, adorable freckles, and the most beautiful smile she’s ever seen. No one understands when she decides to pursue him, especially not the popular kids, but it’s harder than she bargained for to get Mike to trust her, to let her into his heart. Guess it’s a good thing she’s as persistent as she is popular, isn’t it?
Prologue: Summer's End

Chapter Notes

Welcome to my new story! I'm excited to finally share this with everyone, especially considering it's been months since I first came up with the idea and it's been plaguing me ever since.

I'm dedicating this fic to my dear friend Kate (thenewromantics or @milevens on tumblr), who's been encouraging me for months to not only write this, but to keep writing Mileven fics. Kate, thank you so much for being not only an amazing cheerleader, but also one of the best friends I could ask for. This fandom is blessed to have you and your talent and I'm so glad I can call you a friend.

Enjoy, everyone!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They certainly don’t make sunsets like this back in New York City. Or, at least, not ones you can easily see, at any rate.

The thought brings with it a complicated mix of awe, homesickness, and excitement – a lot to unpack, much like the boxes that are still taking up half the floor in her new bedroom, the ones that have been sitting there for the past couple of days as she struggles to get her new room set up perfectly.

But El Hopper isn’t one to dwell much on the things she can’t control. Especially not when there are beautiful sunsets to look at instead.

The sky is awash in the most beautiful shades of orange, yellow, and pink, with wispy clouds doing their best to complement the stunning color palate. It reminds her, actually, of one of her favorite sundresses, still packed away with the half of her clothes she doesn’t consider essential – a pale pink dress with tiny orange and yellow flowers on it – and a flash of inspiration hits. Hmm, maybe I’ll wear that on the first day of school.

El smiles at the thought and, issue resolved, goes back to admiring the view from where she’s sitting out on the back porch. She props her feet up against the wooden railing as she starts gently rocking back and forth on the Hoppers’ new porch swing.

There’s so much about this that’s new and exciting. Back in New York, sunsets were hidden behind tall buildings – unless you had access to a roof top patio, or something, which El never did. Here, the view is completely exposed for anyone to see and marvel at its gorgeous array of colors. And there certainly weren’t any large, wrap-around porches with swings dangling from wide overhands in NYC either – not like El has now.

No, Hawkins, Indiana is shaping up to be very different from New York City. The air smells different, full of grass and dirt and all things outdoors, and when El closes her eyes, she can hear the faint rustling of the breeze blowing through the trees and the chirping of birds.

The gentle humidity sticks to the skin of her bare legs and pulls at the hair piled up on top of her
head, wisps that have escaped her bun sticking lightly to her neck and jaw. It’s a far cry from the stuffy moist heat that radiated off miles and miles of asphalt.

Here, she has a backyard and a porch swing and a house with a bedroom that is almost twice as big as the one in the apartment she lived in with her dad back in the city. There’s so much space and El wants to drown in it.

But, most of all, it’s peaceful, quiet and slower than even the laziest day in New York. There’s no one racing to get to where they’re going, no one shouting obscenities from street corners or pushing their way down busy sidewalks. It’s just nice. El finds herself filling with a sense of calmness like she’s never known before and she realizes she could just sit here all evening, whittling away the hours while she takes in all Hawkins’ scenery has to offer.

“Hey, lazy, what happened to helping me unpack the kitchen?”

El’s eyes widen and guilt pinpricks the skin along the back of her neck. “Oops,” she says, putting on her most charming smile as she turns to look at her dad. “Sorry about that?”

Jim Hopper levels a flat look at his daughter while he approaches the porch swing. “Uh huh. Next time, try it without it your apology sounding like a question.” Even though his face is carefully stern, El can see the beginnings of a smile curling up the corners of Hop’s mouth beneath the thick facial hair.

“No, really, I’m sorry. I got distracted by the sunset.” El turns to look back out at the early evening sky. “It’s pretty, isn’t it?” The sight of what had drawn her away from helping Hop unpack makes El sigh again with just how amazing it looks. Really, she can’t be blamed for getting pulled away from unpacking – which, in El’s defense, she’d been doing when she went to hunt down the scissors so she could open more boxes. It’d been as she was crossing from the kitchen into the mostly unpacked family room when she spotted the view from through the window and had to come admire it in full.

Hop sighs, the sound both resigned and relaxed at the same time. “That it is, Ellie,” he says as he sits down next to her, the chains of the swing creaking with the extra weight.

El glances at Hop out of the corner of her eye and she smiles at the look on his face. He’s a little tired – they both are from racing to get everything unpacked before El’s first day of her junior year and Hop’s first day as Chief of Police on Monday, which is only a couple of days away. But he looks peaceful and relaxed in a way that El doesn’t know if she’s ever seen before.

Two days back in his hometown and he’s already adjusting to quiet suburban life, El thinks with a smile. Truth be told, El’s glad. While the announcement that they were moving to Hawkins felt like it came out of nowhere – Hop pretty much just dropped it on her during dinner one night a week or so after school got out – El also hadn’t been blind to how unhappy he’d been the past few years living in New York. After everything that’d happened with her mom, from the divorce to her just disappearing into seeming thin air, and add in the pressures of being a detective with the NYPD, the stress had definitely been getting to him.

And El has to admit that she’d been scared for her dad. Being a police officer of any kind in New York City isn’t exactly the safest of jobs and there were definitely times where El was afraid Hop wouldn’t come home after his shift or while he got caught up in a case. Hawkins, by comparison, is much tamer – not as much crime, generally a lot safer – and the job of Police Chief means a lot less poking around into dangerous things and a lot more sitting behind a desk.

Yeah, El misses her friends from back in New York – friends from Pep Squad and from Student Government and all the other kids she shared classes with from throughout the years who she would
eat lunch with and hang out with playing video games and go to the mall with. She doesn’t know anyone here, but being a stranger in a strange land has never slowed her down before. Besides, she didn’t have anyone she could truly call a “best friend”, so starting over isn’t really the end of the world.

“Oh, this came for you in the mail,” Hop says, drawing El’s attention back to the present and she looks over in time for her to see him reaching for the envelope tucked into the back pocket of his jeans.

“What is it?” El asks as she takes it from him.

“It’s from school, so probably your class schedule, if I had to guess,” Hop says with a casual shrug. But El can feel his curious gaze on her as she rips open the envelope. And, sure enough, it’s her class schedule, just like Hop predicted.

“Let’s see,” El says as she reads out loud. “Homeroom, English Lit, Honors Trig, French, Honors US History, Honors Chemistry, PE, plus an elective that just says ‘TBD’ next to it.” She finishes with a shrug and she looks back over at her dad.

Hop grins, mischief in his eyes. “So, honors track except for English, huh?”

El harrumphs and she crosses her arms over her chest. “Hey, it’s not my fault books are too full of symbolism. And who needs all those idioms anyway?”

“Did you ever think you’re just too literal?” Hop asks, snickering a little.

El tries not to roll her eyes, but fails miserably. This has long been a sticking point with her. El’s headstrong and stubborn – like, to-a-fault levels of stubborn. It’s how she ended up being friends with almost everyone in her grade despite being one of the more popular girls (it also drove away the only two boyfriends El’s ever had, but that’s another story for another time).

And, because El can’t seem to turn it off, that stubborn streak also carries over to her studies. It’s almost through sheer willpower alone that she regularly makes it into the honors track, where she’s generally able to maintain a B+/A- average… except for in English. And she really doesn’t need her face rubbed in it, thank you very much. “Did you ever think you’re just a jerk?” she grumbles.

Hop laughs out loud at that. “You’re gonna be the only teenager in this town who dares to mouth off to the Chief of Police, you know.”

“Yeah, well, I’m also gonna be the only teenager in this town who has to live with the Chief of Police, so there,” El says before she sticks out her tongue, feeling oh so mature for her 16 years of age. “Really, I’m gonna to go around and tell everyone you’re just a big softy and no one’s going to take you seriously at all.”

Hop gives her another look, eyebrow arched while he smirks. “Oh, please. I carry a gun plus I have the power to arrest people. I’m gonna terrify all the little shits in this town. I remember what it was like growing up here.”

El rolls her eyes again and sighs. “Ok, if you say so, Dad.”

There’s a long pause and father and daughter sink into a comfortable silence, both of them enjoying the view, before Hop speaks up once more. “Hey, um, so I know I’ve asked you this before and you can tell me to fuck right off, but you’re really ok with us moving to Hawkins, right?”

“Yeah, I’m really, really ok with it, Dad,” El says with a small smile. Hop’s looking at her with
concern and, though El’s annoyed that he’s asking her this for what feels like the hundredth time, she knows he’s just worried. “You weren’t happy back in New York and, well, we’ve only been here for a couple of days, but I like it so far – it’s nice here. And I’m excited to make new friends and meet new people.” El pauses before she shrugs, her smile growing even wider. “I think Hawkins is going to be good for both of us. Call it a gut feeling.”

Hop just breathes out a quiet laugh, the sound filled with incredulity. “You’re something else, kid, you know that?”

“So you tell me almost every day,” El says with a grin.

It’s Hop’s turn to roll his eyes and it makes El giggle. “Alright, funny girl. Enough gazing at the scenery. We got a kitchen to finish unpacking before we figure out dinner.”

“Ooh, can we do pizza?” El asks as she and Hop both get to their feet.

Hop gives El a look. “You are aware it’s not gonna be like it was back in New York, right?”

“Give me a little credit, Dad,” El says as she pushes past him. “Besides, it’s cheese and tomatoes on crispy dough. What’s not to like?”

“Dude, this pizza sucks.”

“And who’s fault is that?”

“Hey, I’m not the one who ordered it.”

“I don’t know – I think it’s ok.”

“Ugh, of course you would.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Hey, can we focus on the game? Please?” It’s not an order, exactly, but it sure comes out of Mike’s mouth sounding like one.

Immediately, 3 pairs of eyes turn towards him, gazes filled with a mixture of apology and frustration. A chorus of “sorry, man” rings out around the table the Party’s sitting at in Mike’s basement, the setup for his summer close-out D&D campaign spread out over the surface.

Honestly, Mike gets it, he really does. He understands his friends’ frustration because he shares it himself. It’s the last weekend of their summer vacation and all of them are in mourning for loss of endless lazy days and dreading the school year that starts up in a couple of days.

It’s not that they don’t love school – their classes are mostly great, all of them love learning new things, and A/V club is a great excuse to play with electronics of all types.

Everything else that comes with being in school is where things get, well… disappointing. It’s the girls who look down on them and the bullies who torment them when the teachers aren’t looking and the jocks who make fun of them.

It’s the history of every day of school for the past 10 years following them through the halls of
Hawkins High.

Oh, sure it’s not as bad as it was during middle school. Lucas has gained some middling popularity from being on the baseball team and Mike has helped shore that up with being on the Cross Country and Swim teams (both of which started as a desperate attempt to get out of PE all together since he has the eye-hand coordination of a blind squirrel, but ended up becoming something that helps shut off the anxious voices in his head…at least, for a little while). And Lucas’ girlfriend Max is a firecracker of a girl who scares away half of the student body with her fierce glares and no-nonsense attitude.

The Party isn’t just known for being a bunch of nerds anymore. But in a town where football is king, Lucas and Mike’s second tier sports team status doesn’t do much. And there’s only so much of the rest that Max can scare away, especially because memories are long in a town as small as Hawkins and the Party is still, first and foremost, a bunch of loser, weirdo nerds.

So, yeah, the Party loves school – they would just love it more if there weren’t all the other kids there with them.

Mike sighs and waves a dismissive hand above his DM manual. “It’s ok,” he says. “I get it. It sucks that we start school again on Monday. Which is why I wanna make sure we have one last awesome campaign.” He pauses, looking at Dustin. “And the pizza’s not horrible, Dustin, but yeah, it’s a little off. Maybe they’re having a bad night?”

Dustin lets out a sound that is somewhere between a scoff and a snort and he reaches up to adjust the hat on his head. “Maybe. They have a new cook over there, so maybe that’s throwing shit off.” It speaks to how much pizza they eat that Dustin knowing the intimate workings of their local pizza joint doesn’t even faze the rest of them. But they’re teenage boys who spend way too much time inside playing D&D and video games and ordering pizzas to fuel those gaming sessions, so it makes sense…kind of.

Still, it’s pretty lame. We have get to get out of this town, Mike thinks and he takes comfort in the reminder of two more years. Only two more years and they’ll be leaving this backwater town behind for bigger, greener pastures – Chicago, Boston, or NYC, they haven’t decided which yet – and, except for his friends, Mike can start over with people who haven’t known him since he was six and who have no idea about his nerdy, loser past.

Hell, maybe he’ll even find a girlfriend.

He almost laughs out loud at the thought. Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, here, Mike thinks with no small amount of caution and he resists rolling his eyes in derision. Really, the odds of any girl being interested in him are slim to none. Especially given his history when it comes to girls, which is dismal almost to the point of being laughable.

It’s not a subject Mike likes to linger on for long, especially given the ways he’s been hurt in the past. But, suffice it to say, if he’s learned anything over the past few years, it’s that pretty high school girls are the meanest creatures on the face of the planet and Mike trusts them about as far as he can throw them. And, given his upper body strength, that’s not very far.

So Mike gladly shoves aside the thought in favor of what’s going on right in front of him. “Hold on, let me head upstairs, see what I can steal from the kitchen,” Mike says.

“Ooh, if your mom has any more of those cookies, that’d be great,” Will says, a hopeful, toothy grin stretching across his face.
“Oh, and maybe some more soda?” Lucas adds, looking just as hopeful, but almost mockingly so.

Mike unfolds himself from his chair and gives his friends a look, flat with one eyebrow arched with annoyance. “May I get you anything else? Should I be writing this down?”

“Why, thank you for asking, Michael,” Dustin says with a bright smile, looking up from where he was glancing at his character sheet. “How about-?” He pauses as he actually looks at Mike’s face and his smile fades, an embarrassed blush crawling over his cheeks. “Oh, you were kidding. Sorry.”

Mike breathes out a laugh and shakes his head. “Eh, it’s ok. I’ll be back in a sec.” He turns to go, but after a second, he pauses to toss over his shoulder, “And don’t you dare cheat while I’m gone!”

Mike gets back a series of “yes, dad” and “we won’t!” and he just fucking knows they’re gonna peek at his campaign manual while he’s gone.

_Fine, whatever._

Resigned to his fate, Mike starts heading up the stairs to the sound of his friends chattering behind him. He ducks under the rafter that runs along the underside of the house, careful not to run into it – he’s learned _that_ lesson the hard way many times over the past couple of years. He remembers when he didn’t have to do that, when he was short enough to run straight up the steps without having to worry about hitting his head. But, after having shot up to 6’2” over the past couple of years, those days are long gone.

Even though his growth spurts have stopped (though his doctor says it’s possible he’ll have at least one more), Mike _still_ feels weird in his own body. Like sometimes he looks down at his arms and legs and wonders when they got replaced with spindly twigs instead of bone.

He feels like a newborn giraffe most of the time, stumbling over his own feet, misjudging how far he has to reach for things and knocking them over when he rediscovers that his arms are longer than he remembers. Doing Cross Country and Swim team have helped a little, helping him not be quite so skeletal, but he’s still a lanky hot mess who’s more likely to trip over himself than anything on the best of days.

Maybe someday he’ll figure out how to be coordinated enough to stop being so clumsy, but that feels as likely as him ever finding a girlfriend. So, odds are slim to none on that one, too.

Mike enters the kitchen to the sight of the sun almost finished setting through the window behind the sink. Off in the living room, Mike can hear the low drone of the TV where his dad is camped out on his fucking recliner. And, closer, Mike can hear the sounds of his mom on the phone from where she’s spending time in the kitchen.

Evidence that his parents and Holly ate dinner while he was down in the basement sits camped around the edges of the kitchen counter. Whatever post-dinner chores his mom usually does are on hold as she sits at the kitchen island, legs crossed primly while she leans forward with her elbows propped against the countertop. One hand is holding her cell phone, pressing it to her ear, while the other is holding the stem of her wine glass, half-full with whatever white wine she’s been drinking since dinner.

A humorless smile pulls at the corners of his mouth. _Wonder how much of that bottle is actually left?_ Mike rolls his eyes at the thought before he shoves it aside – his mom’s flirtation with alcoholism is just too depressing to think about for long – and he heads over to the pantry.

Karen catches him out of the corner of her eye and gives him a distracted, little wave, continuing her
“…oh, and you’ll never guess who I ran into at the grocery store today, Lis. Jim Hopper.”

Mike rolls his eyes and barely suppresses the urge to groan. Everyone is talking about how Jim Hopper, born right here in Hawkins, is coming back to take over as Police Chief for old Chief Johnson, who just retired at the grand old age of 72.

Or, at least, it’s all his mom seems to be able to talk about from how often she’s been bringing it up at the dinner table for the past couple of weeks. From what little Mike’s gathered (and only because his mom will not shut up about it), Jim Hopper went to school with his parents, graduated the same year as his mom, and moved to New York to “make something of himself”. Only he became a police officer instead and was on the force during 9/11, which completely transformed his entire life. And now he’s moving back after being away for 20 years, like a chicken coming home to roost, to settle down into a much slower life in the ‘burbs.

Yeah, Mike really wishes he didn’t know any of this.

“Oh, and get this, Lis. He had his daughter with him. Such a pretty thing, she is. And so polite!” A pause, during which Mike manages to dig out a package of Oreos and a bag of potato chips. “About Michael’s age, I think. Yeah, I never pegged him one for having children, but here we are. No mother in the picture, as far as I can tell.”

Mike wishes he could stop listening in, but years of conditioning have made him unable to stop paying attention to the sound of his mom’s voice. He rushes to finish grabbing snacks so he can go back downstairs and just forget about the gossip his mom’s caught up in – which, apparently, includes the news that there’s about to be a new addition to the Hawkins High student body.

Snacks in hand, Mike heads over to the fridge to grab a couple bottles of soda (and tries not to notice the nearly empty wine bottle sitting next to them). He shifts things around so he can hold everything in one armful, which is just about the only benefit to having long arms so far as Mike can tell.

“I wonder if Joyce knows Hop’s moved back into town. You remember how the two of them had a thing in high school before Lonnie swooped in and – hold on.” Mike’s just turning to head back downstairs when his mom looks over at him. Something he did must have caught her attention and Mike freezes in place under the force of her gaze. “What are you doing?”

“And, sure enough, Karen rolls her eyes in an expression of defeat. “Ugh, teenage boys. I swear, you are going to eat me out of house and home.” She refocuses her attention on the conversation she’s having on the phone. “Oh, nothing, Lis. It’s just Mike and his friends eating everything in this house. Like usual....”

Mike takes that as his cue to escape and he disappears back down to the basement, bounty wrapped safely in his arms.

“Hey,” he says as he sets the snacks down by the table the others are sitting at. “My mom didn’t have any of those cookies, Will, so I grabbed Oreos.”
Will shrugs as he reaches for the package. “It’s cool. Oreos are good.”

“Dude, Oreos are awesome,” Dustin says as he tears into the bag of chips.

Mike glances down at the surface of the game table, checking to see if anything’s been moved in his absence. And, as far as he can tell, everything’s as he left it. But that doesn’t mean a damn thing and Mike knows it.

“Man, I can’t believe school starts up again on Monday. Just one more day of freedom,” Lucas says with a strangled sigh as he takes the now open Oreo package from Will so he can grab some before passing them around.

“I still can’t believe Mike has Ms. Palecki for Honors US History,” Dustin says, a cringing grin twisting his lips.

Mike groans and resists the urge to bury his head in his hands. “Ugh, don’t remind me. I can’t believe none of you have to suffer through her class with me. Why couldn’t I get into Mr. Jenkins’ section like you guys?”

“Jonathan told me she regularly makes her students cry,” Will says, voice hushed almost like talking about her will make her appear, like Ms. Palecki is the boogeyman from their nightmares. And she might as well be. Mike’s heard rumors about her Honors US History class, all of them bad – rumors about the workload and the yearlong project that’s worth over half their grade and the insanely difficult tests that students study all night for just to get a B-minus.

“Man, I’m happy I’m not the one who has to be in her class,” Lucas says as he gives Mike a sympathetic look. “We’ll remember you fondly, buddy.”

Mike rolls his eyes, even as dread creeps down to settle heavily into his stomach. “Thanks, I appreciate it. I swear, I have the worst luck.”

“You really do,” Dustin says. “Someone is out to get you. I mean, first you have Ms. Palecki for US History, but you’re also in a different section for Trig? They’re separating the Fantastic Four! Don’t they know we work best as a team?”

For the past 2 years, the Party has been together for all of their honors classes, somehow managing to be in the same section of the two that are offered for each one. But this year, Mike’s on his own for Trig and US History, much to his dismay. School’s lonely enough with the Party with him in class – it’s going to be absolutely soul-sucking without them for, like, half of his entire day. Besides homeroom, he’s never had to be on his own before and he already knows he’s going to hate it.

“Yeah,” Lucas says. “Someone should let them know.”

Will looks over at Mike, eyes worried and hopeful beneath the fringe of his hair. “Did you try asking them to switch you?”

Mike barely keeps the pout off his face, but he knows he still looks sullen and upset – because he is. “Yeah, I tried. I called the school and then my mom called the school. No luck. They pretty much told me unless there was a really good reason, there’s no way they’ll let me switch.”

“Ooh, tell them you need to take math in the afternoons, that your religion demands it,” Dustin says, a dopey smile on his face. “They give kids exceptions all the time for religious stuff, right?”

Lucas narrows his eyes at Dustin. “And what religion makes you take math in the afternoons?”
Dustin shrugs. “I don’t know. One of them has to.”

“Dustin, I don’t think it works that way,” Will says, one eyebrow raised slightly.

“Whatever, I don’t want to think about this right now,” Mike says, voice tight with dismay. “Can we just start the game back up again?”

“Sounds good to me.” – “Sure thing.” – “Let’s do it.” The voices of his friends are enthusiastic and, sufficiently fueled by sugar and grease and soda, the Party gets back to the hunting evil and saving the day. Mike lets himself get carried away in storytelling, in the high stakes drama of the pictures and scenarios he paints with his words, and he doesn’t let himself think about the fact that school is starting up again in a couple of days.

No, he doesn’t let himself think about it at all.

Except for the fact that he knows it’s going to suck like it always does. After all, why should this year be any different?

But, oh, how he wishes it would be.

Chapter End Notes

So, what'd you think? It's only the prologue, so I know not much has happened so far. But next chapter, though...well, expect our two favorite lovebirds to finally meet! What will happen? Only time will tell....

Also, I'm going to try for a shorter chapter, shorter posting cadence for this fic. I'm already about 1k words into the next chapter, so hopefully I'll have it out in a couple of days. We'll see how that goes, though. (also, I have NO IDEA how many chapters this is gonna be. It's all mapped out, but I'm going to do chapter breaks based on feel. Yay experimenting with structure!)
first day (of the rest of your life) jitters

Chapter Notes

Ok, one, this chapter was supposed to be done a couple of days ago, but this week has been crazy. I'm getting ready to head out on vacation for two weeks and trying to get all my projects to a semi-stable state so nothing explodes while I'm gone has been, shall we say...intensive.

Two, this chapter was also supposed to be MUCH SHORTER. I was honestly banking on it being, like 6k and it ended up almost 10k? So...you're welcome, I guess? (i give up you guys, i really do).

Anyway, I hope you all enjoy! Let me know what you think!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When the alarm on El’s phone goes off bright and early on Monday morning, she’s halfway out of bed before the first beep is even finished ringing. She feels like she’s ready for anything, like the whole world is filled with nothing but endless possibility. Her heart pounds in her chest and she’s almost trembling from the adrenaline that races through her veins.

El can’t help it, though - couldn’t even if she tried.

It’s her first day at a new school and she’s just so excited.

And it’s going to be perfect, she just knows it. She has the perfect outfit with the perfect shoes; she knows exactly how she’s going to do her hair and makeup; and she has the cutest new backpack, navy blue with little, white stars littered across the canvas. She’s going to meet new people and make new friends and learn new things.

What’s not to like about any of that?

El hums and dances practically through the entire process of getting ready – from taking a shower to doing her hair and getting dressed to making sure that she has everything she needs in her backpack. There’s a spring in her step as she heads downstairs to the kitchen where she can smell the coffee her dad’s brewing and she smiles just that much wider, unable to tamp down her excitement at all.

Hop’s sitting at the kitchen table when El rounds the corner, fingers of one hand curled around the handle of a mug of steaming coffee, the other gently gripping a piece of toast. He’s dressed in his new tan uniform that marks him as Hawkins’ Chief of Police and El can’t help but laugh a little. It’s been years since she’s seen her dad in a uniform of any kind and it’s almost hilarious. “You know, you look a little ridiculous,” El says as she bounces into the kitchen and drops her backpack off by the table.

“Well, good morning to you, too, sweetheart,” Hop says with dry sarcasm. “And don’t mock the uniform.”

“You look like such a small town cop,” El says with a grin. There’s a plate of toast and eggs on the counter waiting for her and El goes to pour herself a glass of orange juice to go with it.
“Well, I am a small town cop,” Hopper says, grinning back at her in return. “In fact, I’m the head small town cop.”

“Fair point,” El says as, juice in hand, she grabs her plate and heads over to the table to sit next to Hop. “You excited for your first day?”

Hopper shrugs. “A job’s a job,” he says. “I am curious about the guys who’ll be reporting to me, though, so that should be fun.” He takes a sip of his coffee. “How about you? You seem to be excited for today, if that little skip you did as you came into the kitchen says anything.”

El smiles and lets out a giggle. “I’m super excited,” she says as she starts to eat. “It’s going to be great, I just know it.”

“Well, you’re certainly dressed for your first day, that’s for sure. Dress is a little fancier than I think most girls wear around here.”

El shrugs and looks down at her pale pink dress, the one with the little orange and yellow flowers that reminds her of summer sunsets in Hawkins. “I want to make a good first impression,” she says. “Besides, I like this dress. It makes me feel pretty.”

“Well, you look pretty,” Hop says before he arches an eyebrow, a teasing grin stretching his lips. “Am I gonna have to give all the boys in this town a stern warning when I drop you off?”

El scoffs. “Please,” she says with a wave of her hand. “I can fight my own battles, thank you very much. Besides, you made me take all those self-defense classes when we lived in the city. I can punch someone in the face just as well as you can.”

Hopper lets out a full belly laugh, the skin at the corner of his eyes crinkling with humor. “Ah, that’s my girl.” His laughter comes to a stop and he glances over at the clock. “We gotta get moving soon, so hurry up and finish eating. You don’t want to be late on your first day, do you?”

El smiles. “Nope, that would tragic. Who knows what I’d miss if I were?”

The sound of Mike’s alarm going off pierces through the thick veil of sleep still wrapped around him with its seductive tendrils. Groaning, he grabs a pillow and shoves it over his face, like that’ll help keep the world out a little longer.

Unfortunately, like she was lurking out in the hall, his mom opens his bedroom door seconds later, the still-blaring drone of his alarm blending uneasily with the sound of his mom’s voice. “Michael, get out of bed! You don’t want to be late!”

Mike groans again and tears the pillow off his face. “No, wouldn’t want that,” he mutters with an eyeroll as he all but tosses the pillow aside. He squints against the light pouring in from the hallway and tries viciously not to hate both his mother and the fact that this is the first day of school.

He only barely succeeds.

He knows he’s being petulant as he kicks off his blankets, but he just doesn’t care. Mornings really aren’t Mike’s favorite and if he can give them the metaphorical middle finger they so richly deserve, then that’s what he’ll do.
He slouches his way through his morning routine, bleary-eyed and half asleep the entire time. The heat from the shower does almost nothing to wake him up and he’s half-heartedly dreaming of the coffee he’s going to pour himself when his mom isn’t looking (really, what he wants is to go back to sleep, but if he can’t have that, then coffee is the next best alternative).

He first started drinking coffee during his freshman year of high school, when mornings suddenly became all but unbearable. The first time his mom caught him, she’d leveled a stern glare at him with the warning, “You’re going to stunt your growth.”

Mike, who at the time had just finished shooting up to 5’8” and already felt too tall, just returned the glare and let out a deadpan “Good.”

Clearly, though, the coffee did nothing to stunt his growth and, though his mom doesn’t like it when she catches him drinking the caffeinated beverage, Mike notices there’s always just enough in the pot for him to have some in the mornings. Moms. Go figure.

After showering (and absolutely ignoring the mess that is his hair) comes the next major hurdle to Mike’s morning: getting dressed. His mom made him do laundry yesterday, so pretty much everything he owns is clean...it’s just that he doesn’t really like how any of it makes him look.

(Granted, that might be because he doesn’t really like how he looks in general. He’s too tall, too lanky, with feet and hands that even still feel too large for his height and make him fumble about like an awkward giraffe. His nose is too strong for his face, his jaw too sharp, cheekbones too girly, and his hair is just an untamable nest. He’s a mess of angles and frizz and no wonder girls have never found him attractive.)

Mike eventually settles on a pair of jeans and a forest green shirt with blue stripes across the chest. He slings on a black, zip-up hoodie and grabs his black Chucks before heading downstairs. His backpack is already down there (and can he just say that packing it up for school today was one of the most depressing things he’s ever had to do?) so Mike just makes sure to grab his wallet and cell phone on his way out of his room.

Everyone else is already downstairs eating breakfast – his dad’s absorbed in the paper as he drinks his coffee, empty plate off to one side, and his mom’s focusing on making sure Holly has everything she needs, from cereal to fruit to juice.

Only Karen glances over as Mike shuffles into the kitchen and he looks away at the disapproving look on her face. “Well, it’s about time you came down,” she says. “And is that what you’re wearing?”

“Just be happy I’m dressed,” Mike mutters under his breath.

“What was that, Michael?” The tone in Karen’s voice very much indicates that, while Mike knows she couldn’t have hear the words he said, she clearly picked up on the back talk.

“Nothing, Mom,” Mike says. “Sorry.”

His mom sighs, a strangled sound that is filled with defeat. “Just eat your breakfast. You need to be out of here in 15 minutes.”

Mike glances at the clock. It’s 7:15 and first bell’s at 8:00. It takes him 10 minutes to drive to school and another 5 minutes or so to make his way inside. Plus, he’s going to want to stop by his locker to drop off some stuff and have some time to get settled...so, unfortunately, his mom’s estimate is spot on. “Ok, Mom,” he says, not wanting to argue for the sake of arguing. He rushes through eating
breakfast, shoveling down essentially two bowls worth of cereal, a couple pieces of toast, and some eggs, in between sneaking sips of coffee while his mom isn’t looking.

And then, hand forced by the clock that keeps on ticking forward no matter how much he wishes it would just stop, Mike grabs his backpack, makes sure he has his keys, and is out the front door with nothing more than a cursory goodbye to the rest of his family.

The early September morning air is maybe a little cool, but Mike can feel how the day will eventually warm up into a pretty nice day.

Too bad, then, that all he wants to do is crawl back into bed and stay there. But, no, Mike slides into the driver’s seat of his mom’s old station wagon (which became his when he got his driver’s license. It’s not the sexiest car, but it’s a car and that’s what matters) and dumps his backpack next to him in the front seat. He starts the car and, moments later, is pulling away from the curb, sadness tugging at his heart all the while.

*Hawkins High, here I come.*

El finds herself absolutely enraptured with the view that passes by through the front passenger window as Hop drives them from their house in the outskirts of Hawkins in through to the center of the town where the high school is located.

El’s only been into town once, a couple of days ago when she went with her dad to the grocery store, but she was just fascinated with the quaint, small-town vibe. It’s just so different from anything she’s used to. El knows it’ll become normal eventually, but for the moment it’s nothing short of new and different, and therefore exciting.

The cab of the car is quiet, except for the low sounds of whatever classic rock station Hop tuned the radio to, which gives El all the freedom to stare to her heart’s desire.

But, about halfway to school, a thought occurs to El and she rushes to grab her phone, which is in her tiny purse that she stashed in the front pocket of her backpack. A *first day of school selfie is called for*, she thinks with a tiny grin. She unlocks the camera and, after a moment to make sure she’s capturing the best angle, snaps a couple of pictures.

Off to her left, El can practically hear her dad rolling his eyes, but she ignores it as she rushes to post the picture to her Instagram account. “Communicating with your fans on that Pintergram thing again?”

This time, it’s El’s turn to roll her eyes. “Oh my god, there’s so much there to unpack, I don’t even know where to start.” She sighs, not even looking over at her dad as she continues posting her picture. “One, I don’t have fans, I have friends. Like, people I went to school with who are interested in my life and who I want to share updates with.” She finishes posting the picture with the caption “back to school selfie!!! #feelingpretty #newschool” before she finally turns to Hop. “And I know you know it’s not ‘Pintergram’. It’s Pinterest and Instagram, but thanks for trying to play the dumb, old-timey dad. I’m not falling for it.”

“Well, you can’t blame me for trying. I have to get my amusement from somewhere, after all,” Hop says, smirking over at her.

El shakes her head with amused bewilderment and she hugs her backpack close to her stomach after
slipping her phone. “God, I can’t believe you sometimes. How did I ever come from you?”

“Hey, I’ll have you know that you’re just as much of a teasing troll as I am, dear daughter mine,” Hop says.

El wants to push back on that one, but she knows her dad’s telling the truth. El has a mischievous side that she totally got from him and she’s not afraid to indulge in it at all. “Ok, fine, true,” she says, all teenage derision, but she’s smiling anyway as she turns to look back out the window. It can’t be far to the school by now…. “So, any tips you wanna give me for surviving the wilds of Hawkins High?” she asks, glancing over at Hop for a split second.

Hop snorts. “Not really. I’m sure a lot has changed since I was there. Really, I should be giving everyone else tips for how to survive you. You’re gonna turn that school upside down, I just know it.”

El arches an eyebrow as she looks over at her dad. “In a good way or a bad way?”

“Depends on whose point of view we’re talking about, here,” Hop says, chuckling. “Hey, look, there’s the school.”

El turns her head to see the school building approaching through the windshield and the first thing she notices is all the cars parked in the lot. Seems like there’s something of a car culture here in Hawkins. Smiling, she turns back to Hopper. “Hey, since you’re going to be driving whatever police vehicle the police chief drives, can I have this car?” It’s nothing special, a pretty plain and nondescript two door sedan, but El also reckons that beggars can’t be choosers.

“You’d need a license first, missy,” Hop says as he pulls into the parking lot towards the drop-off spot.

El waves a hand and turns to look back out the window. “Psh, minor detail.” There really hadn’t been a need for her to have her driver’s license back in NYC, since she took the bus or subway everywhere. But things seem to be different in Hawkins and El doesn’t want to stand out too much. At least, not like that.

“Hmm, we’ll see,” Hop says as he slows the car down to a stop. “God, it’s barely changed from when I was here,” he muses, sounding almost awed by the whole thing.

Half of El’s brain is thinking up a retort to that while the other is busy taking in the sight of the high school building. It looks like any other suburban high school, like countless of schools El’s seen in movies and TV shows – plain brick, school posters everywhere, students milling in and out of sets of double doors. Her eyes scan the crowd, sizing up the students, trying to get a feel for what they might be like, and –

Oh.

Time ceases to lose all meaning and El wouldn’t be surprised to find that it’s stopped entirely. Her breath hitches in her chest and what feels like a thousand butterflies take flight in her heart, which starts racing to keep up with rapturous beat of those butterfly wings. Every inch of her skin begins to tingle and her stomach swoops dangerously beneath her racing heart.

El is enraptured once more. Only, this time, it’s not with a place or with a thing. It’s with a person. More specifically, a boy, probably the most attractive person she’s ever seen in her entire life.

Pretty.
El almost wants to check to make sure she’s not hallucinating, because there’s no way anyone can be this handsome, this perfect. But he’s real enough, if the people milling around him are any indication, and El’s heart races all the faster.

The first thing El notices about him, which is probably what everyone notices about him, is that he’s tall. Really tall. Anyone who walks by him comes to, at most, within a couple of inches of his towering height. But his height is certainly not the only thing El notices about him.

From the distance that separates them, she drinks in the sight of messy black hair, locks looking thick and soft to the touch and begging for her to run her fingers through. She’s too far to see what color his eyes are, but she can so clearly see the strong line of his jaw and the sweep of his cheekbones and El thinks she’s never seen anyone more beautiful in her entire life.

He’s just standing there, weight shuffling back and forth from one foot to the other like he doesn’t know what it means to be still. He’s clearly waiting for someone, looking up and down at his phone while he does, thumb swiping across the screen, and it just draws attention to how graceful his fingers look.

And then, he spots whoever he’s looking for and he slips his phone in the pocket of the dark blue jeans he’s wearing while the most brilliant smile curls up his luscious, full lips and – oh god, she can’t breathe. The most beautiful guy in the entire world is standing 30 feet away from her and El is so not prepared for the love-at-first-sight pangs that ripple through her.

It’s the most exciting thing that’s ever happened to her in her entire life and El can’t look away while he greets another boy, an African-American boy who’s a couple of inches shorter, with some sort of convoluted handshake that ends in a back-slapping hug. And the entire time, she can’t stop the way her brain races with an endless stream of thoughts and questions, all revolving around this boy who she’s very suddenly and completely smitten with.

So cute – So tall – I wonder how far he’d have to lean over to kiss me? – Ooh, I bet he’s a great kisser, he looks like he would be. – I wonder what his type is. – Am I his type? – Does he have a girlfriend? God I hope not. – Such a nice smile. – What’s his favorite movie? Favorite book? Does he like to read? What does he like to do? – I want to know everything and–

“Hey, where’d you go?” The question comes with the feeling of something shoving at her shoulder and El jumps in her seat, whirling around to see her dad looking at her with mild concern.

“Excuse me, what now?” El says, trying to come back to her senses, but she still feels like she’s living in the most blissful haze, her head and her heart feeling lighter than air.

Some of what El’s going through must be written on her face, because Hopper’s concerned look fades away as amusement shines through. “Ellie, dear, you’re blushing.” A grin stretches up the corners of Hop’s mouth. “Alright, who’s the boy? Or girl, I’m not judging.”

Now that it’s been brought to her attention, El can feel how she’s blushing and it only makes her face heat up even more. “Ugh, Dad,” she groans. She can’t deny that she wasn’t looking at a boy, since she absolutely, totally was, but that doesn’t mean she wants to discuss this with her dad of all people. Especially considering that she’s only just caught a glimpse of this boy who’s already threatening to turn her all upside down. “Really?”

“Ok, fine, fine. I’ll let it go,” Hop says. “But you should probably get out of the car, now. People are going to start to stare and, besides, I need to get to work.”

El glances back out the window, hoping for another look at her guy, but he’s gone – probably went
inside already – and she feels herself deflate a little. *Aw, man....* But, El knows a guy like him is probably easy to spot, so she *knows* she’ll see him again. And, when *that* happens, hopefully she’ll get the chance to talk to him. Because she’s absolutely *dying* to get to know him and she doesn’t know anything about him other than that he’s tall and ridiculously cute.

“Yeah, ok,” El says. “I need to figure out where my locker *and* homeroom is, anyway.” She shakes her head to clear it from her lovesick daze and she smiles over at Hopper. “I’ll see you after school?”

“You still planning on meeting me at the station?”

El’s smile only grows. “Yep, sure am.”

Hop arches an eyebrow. “You know where it is?”

El mirrors his expression. “It’s like you forget I have Google Maps on my phone, or something,” she says as she leans in to press a kiss against her dad’s cheek. “I’ll be fine. I’ll see you at the station, ok?” El pulls back and grabs her backpack. “Have a good day at work, Dad.”

“Good luck in school today, Ellie,” Hop says as she opens the car door. “Knock ‘em dead.”

El gets out of the car and turns to flash a grin at him. “Don’t I always?” she says before she waves. “Bye, Dad.”

“Bye, honey!” El closes the door as Hop returns the wave and she turns around, slinging her backpack onto her shoulders at the same time.

Behind her, she can hear her dad driving away and El takes a moment, letting the anticipation build before she heads in for this brand new adventure. She can see as well as feel people stopping to stare at her – in a town this small, El figures that new students stand out all the more and probably isn’t something that happens very often – but she ignores it. She’s used to people staring at her, so it’s like water off a duck’s back.

El lets her lips pull up in a small smile before she starts making her way towards the school’s entrance.

*Hawkins High, here I come.*

Homeroom has *never* been something Dustin has liked. *Ever.* Mostly because it’s been the one “class” he’s been on his own for without fail. With sections decided by last name, Will and Dustin have been on their own for the past couple of years and it appears that junior year is no exception.

*Ugh, no fair that Mike and Lucas get to have homeroom together. Why couldn’t my last name be in the latter half of the alphabet?*

It’s not that Dustin is afraid of being on his own or anything – he’s 16, not 6, for crying out loud. It’s just that he has no one to talk to. And *that’s* because no one here will talk to *him*, not the other way around.

Years of being called “Toothless” and “loser” and “nerd” have definitely left their mark, which is about all anyone ever see when they look at him. Oh, sure, there are definitely people who are lower on the totem pole than he is – like the stoners, malcontents, and the theater kids – but Dustin is
definitely nowhere near this school’s upper echelons.

Exhibit A of that is the entire empty row of seats around him. Dustin is sitting up front and center… and everyone else has chosen to sit away from him.

Dustin’s in the middle of stewing in his own annoyed thoughts about this horrible injustice – oh come on, it’s not like I have nerd cooties or anything – when movement out of the corner of his eye draws his attention away.

For a split second, Dustin thinks it’s probably his homeroom teacher, but that idea goes up in smoke just as quickly.

Because, standing just inside the doorway is, objectively, one of the most beautiful girls Dustin’s ever seen.

Yeah, definitely not Mr. Evans.

She may not be his type – Dustin’s type runs more towards the blonde end of the scale rather than brunette – but he really can’t deny that this girl is gorgeous. He’s not blind, after all.

So, even though she’s not his type, Dustin still finds himself utterly spellbound as he stares at this girl. He can’t stop himself from drinking in the sight of her, from her pink dress with thin straps and a hem that comes down to a couple inches above her knees, to her honey chestnut hair which, except for a couple of locks that are twisted and tied behind her head to hold them away from her face, is left to fall freely down her back and shoulders in gentle waves, to her fresh-faced beauty with full lips, an adorable button nose, and sparkling eyes.

And, most bemusingly of all, Dustin realizes as he lets his gaze travel down her fantastic legs (hey, he’s only human), she’s paired her whole outfit with a pair of clean, white Chucks.

Huh, that’s different.

Dustin hears the rest of the room hush at this girl’s entrance and he can just feel the questions coming from them because he has them himself. Is she new? Is she lost? Who is she?

The entire time the whole room is checking her out (or, at least the male half of the room, though Dustin won’t deny that some of the girls in the room might also be doing the same), she’s looking back at them in return, sharp gaze taking everything in as she looks for a place to sit.

Dustin knows the only empty seats are the ones in the front row with him and, before Jennifer Hayes can pipe up and demand one of the “lesser folk” move so this new girl can sit with her (because this kind of beauty screams “popular girl”), she does something most peculiar.

She smiles at him and approaches the seat next to him. “Hi, is this seat taken?”

For a moment, Dustin can’t summon the mental power to form coherent thoughts. One, if this girl is gorgeous with a straight face, the sight of her smiling is just blinding with how beautiful it is and Dustin’s always been a sucker for a pretty smile.

Two, and perhaps most importantly, what’s tripping Dustin up is that she’s talking to him. Him, Dustin Henderson, nerd extraordinaire. Dustin knows he’s giving off serious loser vibes – practically every piece of clothing he’s wearing screams “video game nerd” – so why she’s even acknowledging his existence is baffling.

And the fact that her smile seems sincere without a hint of guile?
Mind-boggling.

But, Dustin recovers after a second (and a deep gulp of fresh air) and he tries his best to smile back. “Uh, no, no, seat’s not taken.” He’s proud that his voice only breaks a little and he tries to not blush with how awkward he is.

If this girl notices, though, she doesn’t react and, if anything, her smile only grows wider. “Great, thanks!” she says as she slips her backpack off her shoulders and slides gracefully into the seat to Dustin’s left.

“No problem,” Dustin murmurs and, as she gets settled, he thinks that’ll be the end of their interaction. Pretty, popular girls never really acknowledge his existence.

But, it appears this one might be different because, the next second, she turns back to him and holds out her hand like she wants him to shake it. “Hi, I’m El Hopper. I’m new here.”

Dustin all but has to force himself to respond and shake her hand. Her palm is soft against his and her grip surprisingly firm. Dustin can’t deny the jolt that runs through him at the feel of her hand in his. Not a spark of attraction, no – but something that resonates inside of him with the strangest feeling of deja vu, like he’s met her before.

Only, that’s dumb because he would so remember having met this girl before. But, still, Dustin can’t deny that there’s something about her and it sets him at ease. “I’m Dustin. Dustin Henderson, to be exact.” Ok, wow, could he sound any more awkward?

But, again, the new girl – El – doesn’t even bat an eye at his awkwardness and she grins. “Nice to meet you, Dustin Henderson.”

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, too, El Hopper,” Dustin fires back and he’s rewarded with a low giggle for his mirroring quip. “And, just so you know, you don’t have to announce that you’re new.”

El cringes, but there’s humor shining through the expression. “That obvious, huh?”

“In a town like this, where the last big thing that happened was the Steak ‘n Shake that opened up two towns over? Oh yeah, a new person in this school sticks out like a sore thumb.”

“So, you’re saying nothing ever happens in Hawkins?” El asks with a wry grin.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying,” Dustin says with his own grin. “Hopefully it’s not too much of a change of pace from wherever you’re from.” He pauses, thinking. “Where are you from?”

At the question, El’s grin only grows. “New York City.”

Dustin lets out a low whistle. “Oof, I’m sorry for the culture shock.”

“Don’t be,” El says with a shrug. “It’s kinda nice here.”

Before Dustin can even think of how to respond, movement out of the corner of his eye pulls his attention away and he notices El’s gaze shifting as he looks to see what’s going on. Jennifer Hayes comes into full view a second later and Dustin gulps – speaking of blondes who are his type – feeling himself cower under the presence of one of the girls who’s intimidated him for the past 7 years. For a popular girl, Jennifer is relatively nice, but she goes along with Stacey’s awful behavior way too often for Dustin’s liking and he fervently hopes that El doesn’t succumb to Stacey’s seductive bitchiness. Because there’s no way a girl like El isn't going to get sucked into that social circle and it would be a shame because El seems really and honestly nice.
“Did I hear you say you’re from New York City?” Jennifer asks, voice way too bright and bubbly for a Monday morning.

El nods, a smile on her face. “Yep, just moved here last week for my dad’s job.”

Jennifer smiles politely. “Oh?” she asks, like she’s trying to wonder exactly what kind of job would lure someone to move to Hawkins from New York City.

“Yeah, he’s the new Police Chief,” El says in explanation. The news lands like a bomb and the whole class, all of whom are listening in because of course they are, damn gossips, goes near silent. Dustin can practically hear the thoughts swirling around in the room – god, inviting her to parties is going to suck. – oh shit, the hot new girl is the Police Chief’s daughter? – that’s cop bait, right there – and he knows the news is going to be all over the school before the day’s half over.

“O-oh,” Jennifer says, like she’s maybe a little unsure of the new girl, but she gathers herself a moment later and smiles again. “Well, you have to sit with me and my friends at lunch and tell us all about New York. I can’t imagine how amazing it must have been to live in a place that big.”

“Sure, I guess,” El says. “Though, it’s just a place, like any other, really. Live there long enough and it becomes normal.”

Jennifer lets out a giggle that sounds almost incredulous and she glances back at where she’s sitting a few rows back, pausing to look back at El a couple of times like she’s not entirely sure what to do.

Dustin feels frozen as he watches this take place and it’s El who does everyone a favor by speaking up. “Did you want to join me here up front?”

At that, Jennifer’s face twists like she’s just smelled something disgusting. “Um, no, that’s ok. Though, if you want, I’m sure someone would be willing to move so you could come sit back with me,” she says, giving Dustin a look out of the corner of her eye.

Dustin half expects El to jump at the offer, but she surprises him entirely by shaking her head, a cheery smile on her face. “No, that’s ok. I actually like sitting up front. Plus, I don’t want to make anyone move for me when they chose the seat they wanted. Thanks, though.”

For a moment, Jennifer just blinks, like she can’t believe what just happened – was she just rejected by the glamorous new girl? – but she recovers quickly and gives El a small smile. “Well, that’s ok. I’ll see you at lunch, though, right?”

The hopefulness in Jennifer’s voice is almost sickening and Dustin has to resist the urge to gag. God, how desperate can she be?

“Yes, at lunch,” El says with a definitive nod.

“Ok, great,” Jennifer says. “Well, I’m gonna go sit back down….”

“Ok, see you later, then,” El says before she shifts her attention to grab something out of her backpack. Dustin watches as Jennifer all but slinks away, like she doesn’t want to go and has no choice but to.

And as Mr. Evans walks in, signaling the start of homeroom, Dustin can’t help but smile.

Well, this school year just got a lot more interesting…. 
The news of the hot new girl ripples through Hawkins High like wildfire and, by third period, everyone knows about it.

Mike, of course, finds out straight from Dustin when the Party is reunited for Honors English during second period.

Dustin’s the last of the four to arrive and he slides into the seat the others held for him, a broad grin spread across his face. “Oh my god, you guys aren’t gonna believe this.” There’s a cheerfully conspiratorial tone in Dustin’s voice that has Mike suddenly on edge. What is it this time?

Mike apparently isn’t the only one who’s skeptical, if the raised eyebrows and furrowed foreheads Will and Lucas are sporting are any indication. “This isn’t like the time where you thought Mr. Mills was replaced by a clone, is it?” Lucas asks.

“Or the time where you thought it was a conspiracy that you couldn’t get your hands on Peanut Butter Patties?” Will chimes in with.

Dustin’s mouth turns down in a frown. “I swear, those Girl Scouts are out to get me. One day, I’ll have proof.”

Mike grins, getting into the spirit of things as he gets ready to bring up his own example of one of Dustin’s tall tales. “Or, how about the time where-”

Only, Dustin cuts him off, hand held up in front of Mike’s face. “Ah, ah, ah, ok, I get it. But, this time, what I have to tell you is something I saw with my own two eyes.” Dustin pauses, eyebrows waggling. “Are you ready?”

Lucas rolls his eyes. “C’mon, man, stop being a tease and just tell us.”

Dustin’s earlier grin makes a reappearance and Mike’s reminded so much in this moment of a cat who got the canary. “The Hawkins High junior class has a new student. She moved here from New York City with her dad, who’s our new Police Chief, by the way.”

Mike frowns, Dustin’s words triggering the memory of his mom talking about this over the phone with her friend a couple of days ago. “Oh, yeah, wait, I think I knew this. My mom’s been talking about this for, like, days. Is it, um….” He trails off, thinking, trying to remember. “Hopper?”

Dustin smacks Mike on the arm, mouth agape. “Dude, you knew and you didn’t say anything?”

“Ow,” Mike murmurs, scowling as he rubs at the spot on his arm Dustin hit. “It wasn’t worth saying anything about. I mean, it’s not like it matters or anything. Just another student who won’t pay attention to us unless it’s to make fun of us or torment us.”

The conspiratorial edge to Dustin’s expression only ups another notch. “Not so fast, my friend. This girl might be different. One, she’s, like smoking hot – like I think all the guys in my homeroom were drooling over her. Two, she actually talked to me and she seems like she’s actually pretty nice. And the kicker?” Dustin pauses for dramatic affect. “She voluntarily sat next to me and when Jennifer Hayes offered to get someone to move so the new girl could sit next to her? El – that’s her name, by the way – she said no.” Dustin leans back in his seat, looking smugly satisfied. “She sat next to me in homeroom the entire time and didn’t act completely repulsed.”

Mike rolls his eyes so hard, he swears they almost fall right out of his head. “Oh, please, that’s just because she hasn’t been here long enough to find out we’re the equivalent of social pariahs.”
Will scowls at him. “Ouch. Rude, Mike.”

“Yeah, man, we’re not as bad as the stoners and freaks.” Lucas says.

“Whatever, you guys know I’m right,” Mike says. “Most people in this town don’t give two shits about us.”

“Well, until proven otherwise, El Hopper seems like a nice person who also happens to be supermodel levels of gorgeous,” Dustin says before he grins again. “You’ll know when you see her.”

Mike rolls his eyes. “Right, like she’s going to be in any of our classes,” he says.

“Yeah, I kinda agree with Mike on this one,” Lucas says. “Hot girls are never in Honors track.”

The matter gets dropped when the bell rings and Honors English gets underway. All thoughts of the new girl all but vanish from Mike’s mind and, by the time Honors English is over, Mike’s completely focused on heading over to his Honors Trig class alone while the others head to the Honors US History section Mike should be in.

Yeah, someone really is out to get me, Mike thinks as he gathers his things before he turns to the others. “Well, I’ll see you guys after third period, I guess,” he says, completely unable to keep the sad pouty tone out of his voice. Yes, he’s aware he sounds like a 5 year old and, no, he so doesn’t care.

The rest of the Party give him sad smiles in return as they wish him luck and say their goodbyes (at least, for the next 50 minutes, that is). And then Mike heads off all the way to the other side of campus to where his Honors Trig class is. The only saving grace is that he’s really tall and can fairly easily push his way through the crowds of students that fill the hallways as they each, in turn, try to get to wherever their next class is.

By the time Mike gets to the classroom where he has Trig, about half the seats are taken and he freezes, temporarily filled with a bout of indecision. Usually, he’s with the Party and the four of them manage to claim a small circle of seats next to each other. But he’s on his own and he’s never had to pick out his own seat before.

Oh, sure, he recognizes everyone in this class – the Honors track really isn’t that large, all things considered – but none of them are friends like the Party is.

After a bit, Mike comes back to his senses and he picks what he figures is the least obtrusive seat – the front row, furthest away from the door – which balances his desire to sit up front with the ability to lean out of the way for the people behind him (the downside to being tall, really).

The rest of the class slowly filters in and, one by one, Mike notices that no one picks the empty seat to his left. It seems, even among the smarter kids in school, that Mike is still something of an outcast.

As the last couple of minutes tick down before class starts, Mike slouches in his seat and lets himself fall further into a sulk. God, he can’t wait to get out of this goddamn town.

But then something happens, something that, for at least a little bit, has him completely reconsidering his desire to leave Hawkins.

Mike’s eyes are glued to the clock above the door, counting down the last few seconds until the bell rings, trying desperately to ignore that the only empty seat left in the room is the one right next to him. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see his Trig teacher, Ms. Geno, doing a few final
preparations for class while, around him, Mike hears the sounds of his classmates getting notebooks out of their backpacks and arranging their belongings.

It’s as all this is happening that, at the bottom edge of his vision, Mike notices one last person walking in through the door. And, since he’s already looking in that direction, it’s no effort at all to let his gaze slide down a few feet to see who this last arrival is (or, so Mike figures seeing how as there’s only one empty desk left in the entire room), to see who his seat neighbor for the next 50 minutes is going to be, and –

*Holy. Shit.*

For a moment, Mike isn’t entirely convinced what he’s seeing is real. It’s not possible. Because there’s just no way the most beautiful girl he’s ever seen in his entire life has just walked in through the door. He has to be dreaming or fantasizing or something.

The whole world fades away as he just *stares* at her, immediately ensnared by the sight of her standing in the doorway, and Mike finds himself trying to take it all in, unable to focus on any one thing. The fact that his breath has hitched in his throat and his heart has stopped are completely and utterly incidental. After all, how could anything else *ever* matter?

His gaze dances over every detail, desperate as he is to try and memorize this vision in front of him. He takes in the pretty, pale pink of her dress, decorated with these adorable tiny flowers, the way that the fabric hugs close to the shape of her body before stopping a couple of inches above her knees, and how the bare skin of her shoulders and collarbones is exposed by the thin straps that hold the dress up. He marvels at the luxurious length of her hair, some of it pulled back to keep it out of her face, and finds that his fingers itch to run through the honey chestnut strands to where the ends curl halfway down her upper arms.

But, most of all, Mike can’t look away from her face, her amazingly gorgeous face, with full, pouty lips and delicate cheekbones and the cutest button nose and lightly tanned skin that he wonders if is as soft as it looks. She’s biting that lower lip in a way that makes him want to groan as she looks around the room, taking in everything with eyes that sparkle and shine with piercing intensity, and Mike *desperately* wishes that she’d look at him with that intensity.

Mike knows that he’s probably staring at her like an idiot, mouth agape, and he almost wants to check to make sure he’s not drooling or something. But he can’t deny the way his entire body warms over, like warm honey poured across every nerve ending, or the way that his heart restarts itself, skipping and flipping in his chest, and all Mike knows is that he’s *never* felt like this before in his entire life.

Her gaze slides over to him in the next instant and time just fucking *stops*. It’s a second that lasts an eternity, it feels like, eyes meeting from across the room and Mike doesn’t think he’d be able to look away for anything. And, even more amazing, when she meets his eyes, she doesn’t look away. In fact, if anything, it seems like her gaze widens just a little, like she’s surprised and the look in her eyes is somehow warm and kind even though she’s looking at him.

*(he very much tries to ignore the heavy feeling of deja vu that washes over him at the way their eyes meet across the distance that separates them, like he’s done this before, like he’s always been supposed to be here or somewhere like here, staring at her as she stares back at him. but the feeling, as amorphous as it is, is persistent and mike can’t stop the way it resonates with every fiber of his being.)*

And then the bell rings, signaling the start of third period, bringing the real world rushing back in with startling cruelty.
Mike looks away quickly, a fierce blush rising to his cheeks as he stares determinedly down at his notebook, open and ready for him to take notes. His skin buzzes with the abrupt change in mood—euphoric one second, embarrassed the next—and he tries to ignore the way his hands are suddenly trembling.

...A problem that only gets worse a couple of seconds later when he sees movement out of the corner of his eye and he remembers: the only open seat in the room is the one right next to him.

With a flash of bravado that’s 100% fueled by the attraction that’s roaring through his veins, Mike hazards a look over at his new seat neighbor and it hits him as he does that this has to be the new girl Dustin was talking about, the daughter of the new Police Chief he overheard his mom mentioning.

*El Hopper.*

*God, what a beautiful name.*

El’s hurrying to pull her notebook out of her backpack, a pencil already clutched between delicate fingers. As she straightens, she pushes aside the hair that’s fallen over her shoulder and looks back over at him. An easy smile pulls up the corner of her lips, the sight of it warm and open and so fucking beautiful, Mike almost feels his heart explode. “Hi,” she whispers as Ms. Geno moves to the middle of the chalkboard to begin teaching.

Mike can only smile back, his voice stolen by the sheer, overwhelming power of the sight of her smiling at him.

Ok, so he was wrong earlier: she *is* in his classes. Or, at least, she’s in *one* of them. And the realization that she must be smart as well as beautiful hits him like a punch to the stomach. It’s something that he didn’t think was possible and it’s sending his thoughts into a tailspin.

The only thing that helps is that class has started and Mike Wheeler *always* pays attention in class. So he summons every shred of self-control and focus he has so he can actually, you know, learn *something*. Besides, he *really* doesn’t want to make a bad impression for his math teacher on the first day of class. Especially because Mike Wheeler has, with few exceptions that *really* aren’t worth talking about, *never* been anything other than a teacher’s pet.

It helps...kind of. Though Mike’s able to mostly pay attention to Ms. Geno introducing trigonometric functions, there’s a non-insignificant part of his brain that is hyperaware of the gorgeous girl sitting next to him. It’s unnerving—he’s never been this close to someone so distractingly beautiful.

And, to add to it, as math class ticks by, the immediate euphoria fades as reality slinks back in. Because at the end of the day, beautiful girls like El never look twice at guys like him...except if they need something or to lord it over him how unattainable they are.

The realization sours his stomach and he finds himself getting angry at himself for letting this girl’s admitted amazingly beautiful beauty make him forget the fundamental facts of high school life. If there’s anything he’s learned, it’s that pretty girls like this are *always* part of the popular crowd, kids who look down their noses at everyone else and relish in how everyone either envies or wants them. *I give it a week before she’s firmly entrenched in with the popular crowd and she starts looking down at us ‘lesser folk’ like the rest of the popular kids do.*

Mike’s mostly sobered up from initial shock and awe by the time the bell rings signaling the end of third period—honestly, he’s still a little thrown by both the presence of the girl sitting next to him and the fact that, when Ms. Geno had them do practice problems on their own, El more than held her own and didn’t even try to pawn the work off on someone else.
He tries not to look over at El as he gathers his things and gets up from his seat. But that’s an exercise in futility as he notices her standing only inches from him when he turns to head towards the door, backpack on her shoulders with a notebook clutched to her chest. And even more? She’s looking up at him with that soft smile curling up the corners of her lips and Mike can’t help the way his heart flips in his chest.

And then she speaks and Mike thinks he could fall in love with her just based off the sweet sound of her voice.

*Oh, how he hates his traitorous heart.*

“Hi,” she says. “I’m making it a point to make at least one friend in each of my classes. So, hi, I’m El Hopper.” She punctuates the greeting with an adorable little wave that ends when she uses her hand to flip her hair over her shoulder.

Mike finds himself smiling back *(god, that hair flip was so cute)*, even as a frisson of suspicion ripples down his spine. Does she honestly want to be friends with him? Why? What does she get out of it? But, she’s looking up at him expectantly and Mike doesn’t want to be rude. “Mike Wheeler,” he manages to get out with a voice that, thankfully, barely cracks. “So, uh, I hear you’re the new girl.”

At that, El rolls her eyes. “Yes, I was warned that news travels fast, so I shouldn’t be surprised. And yet….,” She trails off, shrugging while she quirks one eyebrow up at him.

Mike lets out a small laugh despite himself – *god, why can’t he get himself under control?* – and he mirrors her shrug. “Well, you know, small towns and all that.”

“Hmm, that must be it,” El says with a light giggle that pierces Mike’s heart with how *melodic* the sound is and he realizes that he would give *anything* to make her laugh like that again. “Well, it was nice meeting you, Mike Wheeler. I hate to introduce myself and run away, but I need to figure out how to get to my next class. Still figuring out where everything is. I’ll see you later, though, yeah?” She goes to turn, giving him a small wave.

But before El can completely turn away, Mike finds himself rushing to stop her. “Wait, where’s your next class?” El turns back to him, one eyebrow arched with what looks like curiosity and it hits him a second later that she’s waiting for him to explain himself. “Um, maybe I can at least point you in the right direction,” Mike says, cursing his fair skin as he feels a blush rise up on his cheeks. Also, he really needs to be on his way to Spanish class. So why is he stopping to help this girl?

“You sure?” she asks. “I’m sure you have your own class to get to.”

*Yes, you’re right,* Mike’s brain says. But the words that come out of his mouth are *very* different. “Yeah, I’m sure. What class do you have next?”

Giving him a small, yet grateful smile, El opens her notebook and slips out her class schedule from the pocket in the front. “I think it’s French 3,” she says as she turns her body so she can show him her class schedule. And, as Mike leans over so he can scan her schedule to see what room her French class is in, he can’t help but notice that her afternoon class schedule matches his *exactly* ...well, except for PE. *Thank god for Cross Country.*

Still, he can’t seem to get over that a girl this beautiful is mostly in Honors track with him (except for English, but Mike’s not about to ask her why) and he curses himself yet again for being pleased by this turn of events.
Don’t get too invested. She’ll only break your heart. Like always.

The thought helps him get himself under some semblance of control (though, it’s almost a losing battle with his every sense aware of just how close she is and he can’t stop paying attention to the sweet smell of her shampoo to save his life) and Mike focuses on following through on the help he promised her. “So, um, yeah, when you get out of class here, turn right and then make the next left. I’m pretty sure the room you’re looking for will be on your left about halfway down the hallway,” Mike says, straightening as he steps away, even as every inch of him cries out to get closer.

El gives him a bright smile, the corners of her eyes crinkling with the force of it. “Thanks! You’re awesome. I totally owe you.” She takes a step towards the door, still facing him straight on and her smile turns almost coy as she slips her schedule back in her notebook. “Well, I’ll see you around, Mike,” she says before she turns and heads towards the door, the sway of her hips causing her skirt to shift enticingly around her thighs in time with the way her hair bounces with each step.

“Bye, El,” he weakly calls after her, totally expecting her to either ignore it or have not heard it. Girls usually stop paying attention to him once they’ve gotten what they need from him.

Only that’s not what happens and El pauses at the door, giving him a look over her shoulder, a look that is a combination of things Mike can’t even begin to decipher. She smiles at him and there’s a glint in her eye that makes him shiver with how intense it is. She quirks an eyebrow at him, like she’s amused or something, before she trills her fingers at him and disappears from view.

The second she’s out of his sight, Mike feels himself sag, like a marionette who’s strings have been cut, and he lets out a sigh that is both relieved and disappointed in equal measure.

The entire time as he slings his backpack onto his shoulders and heads the other direction to his Spanish class, Mike can’t stop thinking about everything that happened in the last 50 minutes, can’t get seem to wrap his head around how he suddenly can’t get El Hopper out of his head.

And, suddenly, Mike has no idea how he’s supposed to survive this school year.

Well, I’m f***ed.

Chapter End Notes

And they've met each other! Poor Mike, El just makes him all sorts of confused....and it's only going to get worse, muahahaha....

Regarding the next chapter, I'm going to try and have it out sometime on Monday/Tuesday. But like I said, I'm going on vacation to Japan for two weeks and I fly out on Monday, so we'll see how that goes (tho, I do have, like a 12 hour plane ride, so.....we'll see).

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed this! And come find me on tumblr if you're so inclined (I'm @fatechica there, too) so you can watch me cry over how much I miss Stranger Things and Mileven (seriously Duffers, if we don't get a trailer soon, I can't be held accountable for my actions, you hear me???). Catch y'all on the flip side!!
that head over heels feeling (that won't go away)

Chapter Notes

Hoo, alright y’all, I’m back!

Honestly, I thought I could first a) get this out before I went to Japan and then when *that* didn’t happen, I b) thought I’d probably get this out later this week. So I am both disappointed *and* pleased with myself!

Seriously, once I got home, the vast majority of this just spilled out of me. And, once again, I didn’t get to half of what I wanted to (it’s an affliction, I swear…).

So, enjoy 9k words of mileven being adorable and very love-at-first-sight (despite how much Mike *really* doesn’t want to, muahahaha…)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s been almost an hour and her heart still feels like it’s racing.

El practically floats her way through French class – butterflies threatening to take permanent residence in her stomach, her veins alight with the lovesick happiness that flows freely in her blood – and she’s barely able to pay attention to half of it.

It’s all *his* fault.

*Mike Wheeler.*

God, just the thought of his name makes El want to sigh with longing and she’s glad she didn’t have to wait long to put a name to the face that’s managed to completely win her over in only a matter of hours. And, oh boy, if she thought that face was pretty from afar, up close is so much *better.*

*He has freckles.*

It was the first thing El noticed in Trig class earlier – that is, after she’d gotten over her shock that the boy she’d noticed was in the same math class as her (which meant he was *smart*, thank god). She’d been running a little late, having gotten turned around, and it was only by the grace of god that she’d made it before the bell rang.

She still hadn’t taken a seat by the time the bell had rang, however, but that was more because she was frozen in place, shock rooting her in place when she noticed Mike sitting next to the only open seat left in the classroom. For a moment, she’d been unable to think, her mind especially going blank when she caught his eye. He’d already been looking in her direction – like everyone else had been, which, well…wasn’t surprising. She was the last person to enter the room *and* she was the only new student who wasn’t a freshman.

What *had* been surprising was the look in Mike’s eyes as their gazes locked. A heady mix of surprise, awe, and, dare El say it, *attraction* mixed together in the way he was looking at her and El had felt herself warming to the point where she wouldn’t have been surprised if she were blushing from head to toe.
If the bell hadn’t rung right then, El’s convinced that she would never have looked away. Not when the cutest guy in the history of ever was looking at her like he never wanted to look away, either.

El felt it, in that moment, a connection, a spark. It’d been almost like it was preordained, them meeting like this, and the déjà vu sensation she’d been feeling all morning, first after meeting Dustin in homeroom and then just building steadily as the morning went on, kicked fully into high gear.

The bell, of course, had chosen that exact moment to go off and bring El crashing back down to the real world, where time moved at its normal place and teenagers didn’t fall into each other’s eyes across crowded math classrooms.

It hadn’t been embarrassment that had El scurrying across the room for her seat – after all, how could it be wrong to feel this way when it felt this good? – but a look from her Trig teacher who clearly wanted to get class underway after the bell had rung.

So, El hurried to her seat and tried to focus on getting her backpack off her shoulders as quietly as possible and not the absolutely adorable blush crawling up the cheeks of her gorgeous seat neighbor.

Naturally, though, El hadn’t been able to resist smiling over at her new, instant crush, a whispered “hi” slipping from her lips. He’d smiled back, too handsome for his own good, and that’s when El noticed them, the freckles that dappled the skin of his cheeks and nose.

Her heart had gone into overdrive in that moment, cute cute cute tattooed in each frantic beat like the thumping of a drum, and El’d nearly gasped. Because he was devastatingly handsome up close, with those gorgeous freckles and startling dark brown eyes that held more than a glint of fierce intelligence and a jaw and cheekbones she wanted to trace with her fingers so she could memorize their curves.

Yeah, it was nearly a miracle El had been able to pay enough attention in Trig to complete the in-class practice problems with minimal fuss. Though, El also hadn’t been able to keep from looking over at Mike the entire time, enraptured by how he held his pencil and the easy way he followed along with Ms. Geno’s lecture.

Smart is good. Smart is awesome, El had thought somewhere during the class and it was becoming apparent that Mike Wheeler is some kind of perfect.

As long as he isn’t an asshole, that is, had been her follow-up thought.

But that’s the thing, the thing that has El all floating high on Cloud 9. Mike Wheeler is a tall, gorgeous guy who’s smart, witty, and absolutely sweet. He’d offered to point her in the direction of her French class with a shy smile, almost stumbling over his words in a way that was just about the cutest thing El’s ever seen.

El really couldn’t help the way she’d flirted with him, then – playing with her hair, giving him coy smiles of her own – and, if she’s not mistaken, he was into it. Granted, El’d only gotten to talk to him for maybe 2 minutes, but it was something she’d felt on an instinctual level in that moment and it makes her more excited for having moved to Hawkins than she thought possible.

So, yeah, was it any wonder El had barely been able to pay attention in French? I mean, who cares about a language I’m probably never going to speak outside of school? The only French that matters here is French kissing…ooh, kissing….

The bell rings again, jolting El once more out of her thoughts which had taken a very pleasurable turn into imagining what it would be like to kiss Mike. Only this bell signals the start of lunch and El
begins to smile for a different reason.

She has lunch plans with who may be a new friend, a girl who happens to be in El’s French class.

And, El notices as she packs up her things, a girl who’s also coming her way with another girl tagging along.

El lets her smile grow wider as Jennifer and the other girl – who’s name El completely missed when Madame Owens had taken attendance – stop right in front of El’s desk, their things already gathered.

“Hi, El,” Jennifer says, voice bright and excited. “You ready for lunch?"

“Yeah, just let me finish packing up my things,” El says.

“Jen, you going to introduce me? We don’t want to be rude to Hawkins High’s newest junior, now do we?” the other girl says, elbowing Jennifer not-so-subtly in the side.

“Oh, right, sorry,” Jennifer says, blushing, as El gets to her feet and lifts her backpack onto her shoulders. “El, this is Stacey.”

“The new girl from New York City. Welcome to this shithole,” Stacey says, an almost saccharine smile on her face.

El resists the urge to narrow her eyes at Stacey, but only just. If Jennifer comes across as a sweet girl who is maybe a little overly excited and anxious (though El might be starting to discover why), Stacey comes across as fake and calculating and full of self-importance that probably isn’t earned as she looks down at the rest of the world from her lofty perch of smug superiority.

El knows the type: the Queen Bee, the girl all girls look up to and envy as they desperately seek her approval, the girl who’s only nice to people as far as they’re useful to her. El knows that the second the mystique of her outsider status has worn off, El’s only purpose will be as another one of Stacey’s simpering pawns.

Guess it’s a good thing El doesn’t play those games and that she’s not afraid of Stacey’s type. She’s dealt with mean, popular girls in the past and knows she can handle Stacey if necessary.

But, El could also be wrong and it won’t do to start alienating people on her first day, after all.

So, El looks at Stacey and puts on her most charming smile. “It’s nice to meet you, Stacey. And, don’t worry,” El says, glancing over at Jennifer with a conspiratorial twist to her lips. “Jennifer has been nothing but welcoming on my first day.”

The smile on Stacey’s face turns sharp, it’s so simpering. “Good. You are a big deal around here, after all. It’s not every day we get new blood, especially not from so far away.” Then, the smile on Stacey’s face grows excited and it’s the first genuine emotion El’s seen com from Stacey yet. “Now, come on. You have to tell us all about New York. I want to hear everything.”

With that, El is whisked off to the cafeteria, flanked on either side by Jen and Stacey. It doesn’t take long for El to find herself sitting at the table where, from what El can tell, the popular girls all sit. It’s apparent from how the football players in their letterman jackets linger around; in the exaggerated giggles and over-the-top preening each girl does, like they know they’re on display; in the immaculate clothes that, while a little dated to El who’s just come from one of the fashion centers of the world, are stylish and trendy compared to what every other girl in this school is wearing.

It’s a little refreshing to know that some things are the same no matter where one is, that teenagers are
still, well… teenagers. It eases the nervous knot in El’s stomach that she hadn’t been aware of until it was gone and the relief she feels is palpable.

Which just lets her focus on trying to remember all the names of the girls she’s eating lunch with – a near-impossible task since El is horrible with names.

“So, what’s it like living in New York?”

El looks over at who spoke – a girl with short, dark blonde hair whose name is either Casey or Ashley or one of those “ee” names that El can’t quite recall despite having heard it only a few minutes ago – and she smiles as she pokes at her food, an unappetizing blend of sauce and meat that El’s going to have to force down if she wants to eat any of it.

(Another reassuring, if disappointing thing: school cafeteria food is universally awful, it seems.)

“What do you want to know?” El asks and she puts her fork down (yeah, this food is a lost cause).

“Oh, I don’t even know where to start,” the girl who asked the question says.


El shrugs, her smile turning a little bashful. “I’m not sure what you want me to say. I grew up in New York, so it was all normal to me.”

“Oh, did you go to Times Square? What about shopping on 5th Avenue? I bet the shopping is just amazing.” This is from Jennifer, her lips twisted up in an eager smile.

El can’t hold back the gentle snort and eye roll the question inspires, but she manages to follow it up with a small smile. “Sorry to disappoint, but I’ve only been to Times Square a couple of times. Honestly, it’s so overrun by tourists that my friends and I mostly just avoided it. And, yeah, we’d go to 5th Avenue to browse through some of the stores and stuff, but, like, they’re all so expensive. We’d just end up buying stuff at, like, thrift stores and outlets and stuff.”

El can tell from the looks on everyone’s faces that this is not what they wanted to hear. El knows, to these girls, her life in New York seems fabulous and fantastical – miles away more exciting to them than their lives back in Hawkins. But El doesn’t know how to convince them that her life back in New York was nothing special. She went to school, did homework, and hung out with her friends. Sure, there were a lot more things to do when she was with her friends than there probably are here in Hawkins, but El knows you can have a million things to do at your fingertips and still be bored.

But that’s a lot to try and convey during the 40 minute lunch period and there are a lot of eager eyes turned her way.

So, El decides to give them a little bit of what they’re looking for: a little bit of adventure.

“Let me tell you, though, about the amazing fashion you can find at high end thrift stores in Manhattan. And I mean custom-made designer stuff. Once, I found this gorgeous blouse I swear I saw on the runway during New York Fashion Week….”

The girls eat it up. To the point where El feels almost embarrassed at the looks they’re giving her – desperate, enraptured, envious – like they would give anything just to experience what El’s lived.

But, she keeps talking regardless. She tells them about trawling Manhattan thrift stores for hidden treasure, day trips out to Coney Island, about trying to figure out what movie or TV show was filming in any of the Burroughs at any given time, about the subway and the food and all the people
– all in all easily telling stories about her life before moving.

Or, rather, it was supposed to be easy. But a couple of minutes in to regaling her new friends with stories of her previous life, El catches a glimpse of Tall, Dark, and Handsome that appears out of the corner of her eye and she can’t help but glance over. Oh, hello.

For a moment, El can’t help but stare as Mike makes his way across the cafeteria, tray of food held in both hands as his long legs make easy work of his journey. Mike Wheeler appears to be a jumble of contradictions. His steps are smooth, almost graceful, but he hunches his shoulders as he walks like he’s trying to hide – or, at least, not be so noticeable.

*Good luck with that, cutie. Not with that height.*

El almost wants to sigh. Even at this distance, Mike Wheeler is just *so cute,* it’s almost overwhelming.

Actually, scratch that; there’s no “almost” about it since, apparently, the sight of Mike walking across the cafeteria is enough to steal El’s voice. In fact, she apparently stopped speaking mid-sentence, attention drawn away when she spotted Mike, and she’s only made aware of it when she sees a hand being waved in front of her face.

“Hey, El, you were saying? About the people on the subway?”

It’s Jennifer’s voice and El blinks, coming back to the present out of the lovesick fog that’s invaded her brain, before she tears her gaze away from Mike to look over at Jennifer. “Hmm, sorry?”

The smile on Jen’s face is both confused and concerned, but somehow still bright. “You trailed off there.”

“Yeah,” Stacey says, cutting in. “Everything ok?”

El gives herself a shake before she smiles. “Yeah, sorry, got distracted. So, like I was saying….”

El keeps talking, but the entire time, half her attention is firmly on Mike where’s he’s eating lunch with his friends (one of whom she notices is Dustin and, god, she wishes she knew why that makes sense). She can’t stop from noticing the way he talks to his friends, all smiles and laughter punctuated with flashes of good-natured exasperation – clearly he and his friends, a group of 3 other boys that includes Dustin, like giving each other shit and having a good time.

At some point during lunch, El begs off telling stories, asking instead to hear more about her new friends and Hawkins. The ensuing conversation takes only about a minute to evolve into what everyone did over summer and it gives El even more freedom to look over at Mike’s distracting attractiveness.

But, at some point, El must have been staring, because someone snaps their fingers in front of El’s face. “Hey, is everything *really* ok?”

It’s Stacey who asks and El forces herself to pay attention to her, a blush spreading over her cheeks. “Sorry,” El says. “Just taking everything in, you know?” It’s a lie, a *total* lie. But, for as straightforward as El can be, she’s not about to reveal her nascent crush on a guy she barely knows to a bunch of girls she’s only just met.

At this Stacey rolls her eyes. “I can’t imagine that there’s much to take in, but sure, you do you, I guess.”
El smiles, almost overly perky. She’s almost positive that kind of passive aggressiveness usually ends with people falling at Stacey’s feet either to agree with her or give her what she wants, neither of which El is about to do. Stacey, your ploy for dominance is showing.

“Hey, I think it’s nice here,” El says. “I can actually hear myself think and the odds of my dad getting killed on the job are a lot lower.” A guilty look crosses Stacey’s face and a ripple of disbelief moves across the table – clearly, no one is used to someone showing Stacey up and El crows a little internally at the victory. But, outwardly she only shrugs. “Besides, you guys have the prettiest sunsets out here. So much better than in New York.”

A look crosses Stacey’s face, then – like how could anything be better than New York? – but she drops it a second later as she looks over at another girl. “So, Verna, you never did tell us about going to California over the summer....”

The conversation starts back up again and, with everyone’s attention focused elsewhere, El goes back to half listening, half staring at Mike from across the cafeteria.

Only, when she looks back over, this times, Mike’s looking right back. To be fair, all four boys at that table are looking at her, but El only has eyes for Mike.

It feels like his gaze pierces her right in the heart, which skips the next couple of beats before it takes off racing in her chest. A blush crawls up El’s cheeks and she’s suddenly having a hard time drawing in a full breath.

There’s just so much going on in the look Mike’s giving her: confusion, shy embarrassment, curiosity, hesitancy, even a little...annoyance? anger? But, all throughout, there’s an undertone of tension, heated and sweet – it’s attraction, plain and simple.

(though nothing about this feels plain and simple, not with the way every inch of el’s skin tingles with anticipation, with the way gentle heat fills her veins and makes her feel like she she’s inches away from becoming untethered from gravity entirely.)

She wonders, though, at the guarded look in Mike’s eyes, at what’s making him look at her with shy hesitancy, like he’s bracing himself for the worst...like he’s experienced nothing but bad things from having a girl look at him across a crowded room.

It makes El want to frown as her heart twists in her chest – who hurt you, Mike Wheeler? – but she resists the urge. Instead, she leans in to the light, fluttery feelings that flow freely through her.

El smiles at him, then, the curl of her lips gentle and sweet, and hopes she’s coming across as welcoming and non-threatening. She’s rewarded with a blush that appears high on Mike’s cheeks, adding color to those amazing cheekbones, and El’s heart does another pitter-pattering skip in her chest.

Mike hurries to look away a split second later, as do the rest of his friends, and El can see the way he slouches as the rest of his friends jeer a little and nudge him with their elbows. El rolls her eyes – typical boys, go figure – and her heart goes out to Mike as he tries to get his friends to stop teasing him. Still, she’s not going to apologize for smiling at him, not when the sight of him makes her feel like she can fly.

El just hopes that, next time, Mike smiles back.
“The new girl’s looking over at us again.”

Mike cringes at Will’s statement, just like every other time one of the Party has mentioned the fact that, for whatever reason, El Hopper is looking in their direction. And, also just like every other time, a strange frisson of nervous energy ripples down his spine to settle uncomfortably in his stomach and the small of his back, leaving him feeling squirmy and paranoid.

It’s like he can feel it whenever El looks over, skin prickling with discomfort and something else Mike really doesn’t want to look too closely at (but which feels an awful lot like attraction). Honestly, Mike just really wants to know why El keeps looking over at him…and, at least, at the table that the Party is currently occupying.

From the handful of glances that he’s managed to covertly steal out of the corner of his eye, Mike knows El’s sitting with the Who’s Who of Hawkins High, the upper echelons of the school’s popular crowd. It should be everything El aspires to, with her popular girl beauty and sophisticated, exotic mystique from growing up in a big city. She seems to have all the popular girls, even Stacey, eating out of the palm of her hand. And Mike doesn’t even want to hazard a guess as to what the popular boys think of El – it’s probably gross and disgusting and completely demeaning. But that seems to be what all the popular girls like, so it should be right up El’s alley, right? So….

“Why does she keep looking over at us?”

It’s like Lucas plucked the thought right out of Mike’s head and Mike finds himself nodding along with it.

Dustin shrugs. “Maybe nerds are cool where she came from.” He pauses, taking a moment to waggle his eyebrows. “Or maybe she’s hot for me. She was awfully nice to me in homeroom.”

At this, Mike can’t help but roll his eyes. “Oh, please. She was nice to me in Trig this morning. Doesn’t mean she’s attracted to me either.” It’s only when the words finish leaving his mouth that Mike realizes his mistake.

He hadn’t planned on telling the others about his encounter with El Hopper – about the way she smiled at him and talked to him and played with her hair and gave him looks from beneath her eyelashes that made him feel funny inside in the best way possible. When he thought about it during his Spanish class – which subsequently made him only catch about half of what happened since he can’t seem to stop thinking about the new girl, much to his frustration – it occurred to him that El might have been flirting with him.

But that is so far outside the realm of possibility that the whole incident didn’t seem worth mentioning. After all, why would a pretty girl be flirting with him? So he decided not to say anything about it because he also knows that the rest of the Party won’t see it that way.

Which, given the looks the others are now giving him, is exactly what’s happening.

“Why, Michael, is there something you’re not telling us?” Dustin says.

Will’s grin is just as shit-eating as Dustin and Lucas’ and Mike realizes once again that Will’s innocent demeanor is nothing more than a fucking sham. “Yeah, it sounds like something happened with the two of you this morning.”

Mike levels a glare in Lucas’ direction. “Are you channeling your girlfriend now?” he asks, eyes narrowed as he lightly taps his fork against the edge of his tray. “And where is she, anyway?”

Lucas leans back and crosses his arms over his chest, a smug smile stretching up his lips. “Max is hanging with her Softball friends. But nice try on dodging the question.”

His arms twitch with the desire to cross over his chest in a mirror of Lucas’ stance, but Mike knows that he would only come across as defensive, which is the last thing he wants. Especially because there’s absolutely nothing to be defensive about.

Right?

So, Mike shrugs and hopes he’s coming off as calm and collected. “Nothing’s going on,” Mike says, fighting to keep his voice steady. “Turns out she’s in a bunch of my classes. She sat next to me and I helped point her in the direction of the class she had after. That’s it. Nothing else.”

“Hmm, I don’t know. I think someone’s trying a little too hard to be cool about this,” Will says.

“Yeah,” Dustin says, one eyebrow raised skeptically. “Are you honestly trying to tell me that you sat next to probably the most beautiful girl in this entire school and you felt nothing? I mean, look at her.”

With that, Dustin turns, twisting slightly in his chair so he can look in the direction of where El’s sitting with all the other popular girls. The rest of the Party follows suit a moment later and Mike finds himself looking directly at El Hopper for the first time since he watched her walk out of Trig earlier that morning.

His heart thumps heavy in his chest at the sight of her, sitting there talking and smiling with a bright look in her eyes and a confident set to her shoulders. El really is the most beautiful girl he’s ever seen – in fact, it’s almost unfair how beautiful she is since girls like that seem to exist only to taunt him with how far out of his league they are...that is, if they even acknowledge his existence.

So it comes as a complete and utter surprise when, maybe two seconds later, El looks back over. Her gaze locks with his across the crowded cafeteria and the most enchanting blush crawls up her cheeks. He can hear the snickers and giggles from his friends from behind and next to him, but they sound so far away as to almost be inconsequential, like he’s hearing them from very far away, the noise almost muffled with how little he’s paying attention.

Especially because, for the briefest of moments, nothing else matters other than her and the way she’s looking at him. There’s a hint of surprise in her eyes, like she’s caught off guard by the fact that he’s staring back at her, but the rest of her gaze is all warmth and happiness.

And Mike wants to know why. Unease settles low in his stomach, souring his appetite that was already made meager by the awful cafeteria food. The simplest explanation is that she likes him, but that’s just ridiculous. All of his experience with girls, although very limited, says that nothing good can come from being noticed by a beautiful, popular girl.

Mike’s first thought, as always, is that she wants something from him – and that once she gets whatever it is, she’ll drop him like a bad habit. It’s either that or that she’s messing with him, using the fact that she’s beautiful and popular to trick him into making a fool out of himself so she and her new friends can all laugh at how much of a pathetic loser he is.

A flash of anger sparks in his chest – why do popular girls always think guys like him are disposable? – and it wars with the curiosity and the undeniable attraction that’s already present,
making him even more confused and annoyed. He wishes El would just come right out and say what she wanted so he could prepare to be disappointed when she starts ignoring him well ahead of time instead of getting blindsided by it like always. Because that has to be why she’s looking over. It has to be.

But, if that’s the case, why is she blushing?

And then El smiles at him and Mike feels the bottom fall out of his stomach. So pretty, is about the only coherent thought Mike has as the full weight of her warm, gentle smile hits him like a physical blow, making his whole body feel light and tingly. His heart stutters in his chest and Mike has to gulp against the gasp that builds up in his throat. He can’t help it, though – El’s smiling over at him like there’s no one else she’d rather be looking at and he fights against the hope that builds up inside his heart.

But he can’t fight the blush that rises to his cheeks, hot and sudden. Feeling way too exposed, Mike rushes to turn back around, to look away so he doesn’t do something stupidly embarrassing like fall in love with her or something. Because that’s what I need. To fall for a girl who will never feel the same about me. He wants to just forget that this ever happened – nothing good can come from this, he just knows it.

But the rest of the Party isn’t about to let it go. “Dude, did you see that?” Dustin says, voice straining with a yelled whisper as he roughly nudges Mike with his elbow. “She fucking smiled at you, man.”

“Yeah, maybe she likes you,” Will says through a grin, his eyes dancing with a teasing glint that makes Mike want to scowl.

Lucas snickers, clearly unable to hold himself back. “Maybe Lanky Nerd is the hot thing back in New York, or something.”

Ok, now Mike’s scowling. “God, you guys, shut up. She doesn’t like me like that, ok? She’s just being nice so she can get whatever it is she wants from me.”

Dustin lets out a snort of amusement. “Yeah, a piece of hot, nerd-loving action,” he says, eyebrows wagging, grin ratcheting up to unbelievable levels of smarmy and annoying.

Mike groans. “Guys, please. Can we not?” Yeah, he’s begging now and he’s not afraid to admit it. Anything to get them to stop making this worse than it already is.

But, naturally, they don’t stop. In fact, the teasing continues throughout the rest of lunch – not overtly, but constant with double entendres and sly one-liners and teasing jabs that have Mike’s hackles completely raised and his frustration level at a boiling point by the time lunch ends. It’s so bad that Mike is actually looking forward to his Honors US History class, a class taught by the meanest teacher in the entirety of Hawkins High history…

...A class he also shares with El who, if the way the back of his neck pricks is any indication, has not stopped glancing over at him throughout the entirety of the lunch period.

“Ahh, alright, that’s it,” Mike says a couple of minutes before the bell rings to signal the end of lunch. The teasing just won’t seem to stop and if Mike has to feel El’s eyes on him any longer, he’s going to develop an involuntary twitch from the way the skin on the back of his neck pricks. All in all, he’s pretty sure he’s never felt so frustrated and annoyed in his entire life and it’s not outside of the realm of possibility that he just won’t explode or something. “I’m heading to history class. See you assholes later.” He scoops up his tray with his half-eaten lunch on it and fucking beelines it out of there, not even waiting to hear the others say goodbye to him.
The halls are practically empty as Mike makes his way to his locker to grab his things and he sighs in relief. The near-silence around him is like a balm for his overworked nerves, helping to quell the agitation building in his chest. By the time he’s made it to his history classroom, the knot of frustrated tension has begun to loosen from where it’s crowding in his stomach.

Mike gets to the open doorway and, for a second, he just stands there. The only person in the room is Ms. Palecki, who’s sitting at her desk and looking down at her notes, glasses perched delicately on her nose. She must notice his arrival out of the corner of her eye and she looks up, her sleek blonde bob swishing about her face. The smile she gives him is not unkind. In fact, it’s almost nice, like she either has no idea of how she’s perceived by the entire student body...or she honestly enjoys her reputation for torturing her students.

Either way, the look on her face is welcoming and Mike finds himself relaxing a little despite himself. “Welcome!” she says. “You’re a little early.”

Mike shrugs, embarrassment creeping down to settle between his shoulder blades, the skin along his spine itching with it. “Um, yeah. Sorry? Just...wanted to find a good seat.” Mike cringes before he’s even finished speaking at the words that are coming out of his mouth. Oh my god, could he get any lamer? Literally, there are nothing but empty seats in front of him; it’s not like he has to go searching for one. God, what kind of loser is he?

Ms. Palecki waves her hand over the sight of the empty desks in front of her. “Take your pick....” She trails off, one eyebrow arching, clearly waiting for Mike to fill in the information about who he is.

“Um, I’m Mike. Mike Wheeler,” he hurries to say, a blush spreading over his cheeks. God, he really wishes he weren’t quite so pale, or that he blushed so easily, or both – both would be fantastic.

“Well, have at, Mr. Wheeler,” Ms. Palecki says before she looks back down at what Mike presumes are her lesson plans, a thick binder stuffed to the brim with sheafs of paper designed to torture the hell out of her Honors US History section.

Mike nods, mostly to himself since Ms. Palecki isn’t looking at him any more, and he grabs, effectively, the same seat he had in Trig earlier that morning: front row furthest from the door. He slides his backpack off his shoulders and takes the last few seconds of quiet before the bell ring to pull his notebook and thick textbook out of his backpack, cringing the entire time at just how massive his US History book is.

Does she really expect us to read all of this? Mike thinks with a frown as the bell rings, signaling the end of lunch.

Students start coming in, one at a time, through the open door and Mike can’t stop from keeping an eye out for every new arrival. He knows one of them will eventually be El and, despite himself, he’s curious to see what her reaction is going to be when she notices him in another one of her classes... if she notices him, that is.

It’s just as Mike’s in the middle of chiding himself for forgetting the cardinal nerd rule of popular girls (crucially, don’t fall for them ), when the third person after him to arrive walks through the door...

And it’s El.

This time, the vast majority of seats in the room are empty. The only other two students are sitting away from Mike – one of them directly in the middle and the other directly behind Mike a few rows
back – so the seat next to him is still open. But El has her pick this time and Mike curses himself for being desperately curious about where she’s going to sit.

But, as it turns out, his curiosity is definitely warranted because, after doing a quick scan of the room, El’s eyes land on him and a look of pleased surprise crosses her face. Her eyes widen, her gaze brightens, and a beautiful smile pulls up at the corners of her mouth, the fullness of her lips curling in a way that has Mike’s heart skipping a beat.

*God damn traitor.*

It’s like, the second she spots him, none of the other empty seats even register because El heads straight for him, fingers curled around the straps of her backpack as her smile turns a little shy. She stops in front of the empty desk to Mike’s left and glances down at her feet for just a second before looking up at him. A sheepish look has crept into her gaze and Mike’s not sure how she manages this, but he thinks that the shyness somehow makes her even prettier. “Hi, Mike,” she says. “Um, is it ok if I sit here?” she asks, using her elbow to point at the desk in question. “It’s just… I know I made things awkward with you and your friends at lunch, so I totally wouldn’t blame you if you’d rather I sit somewhere else.”

For a second, Mike just looks at her, shocked. Of all the things, he hadn’t expected her to bring up the fact that she was all but staring at him during lunch and he finds her bluntness, well, a little relieving. It takes him a second longer to find his voice, as he’s having a hard time shaking himself out the shock that’s still rippling through him, but he manages to smile back at her just a little.

(Honestly, it’s hard *not* to smile at her. She’s just *so pretty.*)

“Um, no, it’s fine. You can sit here,” he says. It’s a fight to keep his voice even, to not sound too eager and reveal just how pathetic he really is when it comes to pretty girls.

El’s smile widens, showing off the cutest dimples he’s ever seen, and Mike almost fucking *swoons.* “Great, thanks,” she says as she slips off her backpack (and Mike *desperately* tries not to notice the way her back and shoulders arch to do so, the material of her dress pulling tight across her chest – suffice it to say, he fails miserably). She slips into the empty seat, one eye on him the entire time as she grabs a notebook out of her backpack. “It’s just that I meant it earlier when I said I wanted to be friends and, well… friends don’t make each other feel awkward, you know?” She sits up straight and looks over at him, one hand coming up to lazily brush her hair back over her shoulder, her fingers trailing against the curve of her neck and shoulder. Mike wishes it was his fingers tracing that path along her skin and hates himself for it.

“Well, in my experience, friends are all about making each other feel awkward. At least, that’s how my friends and I treat each other,” Mike says, unable to keep himself from grinning despite how his skin suddenly feels too tight and the way his stomach churns with a combination of attraction and wariness.

El’s smile morphs into a grin that mirrors his, a beguiling pink spreading over her cheeks. “Hmm, maybe you need to rethink your friendship strategy,” she teases, eyes twinkling. And when she winks at him a second later, Mike’s heart practically fucking *floats* away, it skips in his chest so hard.

God, how is he supposed to *not* fall in love with her?
For a moment, El’s afraid that she may have taken it one step too far with the winking. Though, in her defense, it’s not like she planned to do it. It just happened, very spur of the moment. She’d been caught up in the high of actually talking to Mike, like they were just a boy and a girl having a normal conversation, when he smiled at her as they talked about friendship.

No, not smiled – grinned. Mike Wheeler fucking grinned at her and it was the hottest damn thing she’s ever seen in her entire life.

God, that should not be allowed, is the only coherent thought that manages to float through her mind. She’d grinned back, of course, leaning into the coy and playful mood of the conversation. And then she winked, unable to stop it from happening, the flirtatious gesture just slipping out.

Of course, El only realized what she did when she saw Mike’s face go almost blank and now she’s having a minor freak out. God, is she coming on too strong? What if Mike doesn’t want her to treat him like this?

But those concerns dissolve a moment later when Mike offers her a shy smile. “Bold of you to assume I had a friendship strategy,” he says and relief spreads through El’s veins. Ok, she hasn’t turned him off or offended him. And, god, that shy smile is just adorable. There’s a little hesitancy and fear around the edges and El realizes, in this moment, that Mike’s a gentle, sweet boy who’s probably been hurt in the past and, damn, does El ever want to find out who did it so she can kick their ass.

But he’s a gentle, sweet boy in possession of a rakish grin and, lord, is that a dangerous combination.

“So you just made your friends willy-nilly?” El asks, the words spoken through a laugh.

Mike shrugs. “It’s more like we were the odd ones out, so it was only natural we would become friends since no one else wanted to.”

There’s an undertone of derisive anger in Mike’s tone and El wants to frown, but she manages to keep her emotions in check. “Well, for what it’s worth, I want to be your friend,” El says. Which is only part of the truth. Honestly, she wants to be more than friends, but Mike’s shyness and hesitancy makes her wary of really coming on too strong. She doesn’t want to spook him, after all. Not until she knows for sure whether or not he’s receptive to it.

Mike snorts and gives her a wry smile. “You said that already.” The words are spoken with dry humor, but there’s still a spark of hope that alights in Mike’s gaze and it sets El’s heart all aflutter.

“It bears repeating,” El says with a shrug. “Especially considering your horrible friendship-making strategy.” She smiles over at him to make sure he knows she’s teasing and she’s rewarded with Mike’s low laughter. That flutter in her heart? It’s a full on stampede of butterflies at this point and El’s never felt so full of light in her entire life.

“Somehow, I have a feeling you’re never going to let me forget this, are you?” Mike asks her, one eyebrow arched as he leans slightly towards her.

El giggles. “Nope!” she says, almost too eagerly, and anything else she has to say gets lost as the bell rings, signaling the start of 5th period. With a jolt, El looks around to see that, while she got caught up in talking with Mike, the rest of the room filled in and Ms. Palecki is standing at the board, finishing up writing her introductory notes. El turns back to Mike and gives him a sheepish smile, mouthing “whoops” with a cute, little shrug.

Mike blushes – embarrassed at not noticing how much time had passed or annoyed at El
monopolizing his attention, she’s not sure – but he immediately looks away and focuses on Ms. Palecki, so it could be either. Regardless, El lets herself wallow in the sting of uncertainty for only a moment before she, too, focuses on paying attention in class.

And it’s a good thing El’s able to give Ms. Palecki her mostly undivided attention. Because this class is going to be intense. A year long project worth half her grade? Done in assigned pairs? A cumulative final in the spring covering the whole class? What in the shit is this? Suddenly, El’s very glad she’s stubborn and headstrong; she has a feeling it’s going to be the only thing that gets her through this class.

And, after 40 minutes during which they barely were able to scratch the surface of pre-colonial America, the bell rings and El’s free to head over to her Honors Chemistry class, feeling a little dazed and shell-shocked all the while.

“You ok, over there?”

The voice is Mike’s and El’s heart leaps into her throat as she turns in her seat to face him. Mike’s looking down at her as he stands next to her desk, causing El to crane her neck so she can look back up at him. God, he’s tall…. “Excuse me?” El asks, feeling a little dazed under the power of Mike’s concern. His eyebrows are gently arched, brow furrowed, and his lips are pulled in a worried frown. Seriously, how does he even make this look cute?

Mike blushes, looking a little embarrassed and uncertain now, and El realizes that she might have come across as defensive there, when, really, she’s just overwhelmed. “It’s just that you look a little, I don’t know….”

El lets out a low laugh as she gets to her feet, backpack in one hand so she can put it on her seat. “Frazzled?” she offers, making sure to smile. Mike nods and El glances down so she can put her things in her backpack. “Just… this class is going to be a lot, isn’t it?” she says, keeping her voice low so Ms. Palecki can’t overhear.

Mike smiles, reassuring, the embarrassment and uncertainty fading. “Yeah, sorry, I guess you wouldn’t have known,” he says, just as low, his voice almost raspy. “Ms. Palecki has something of a reputation here at Hawkins High.”

“Gee, I wonder why,” El says with another laugh, this one weak and breathy, lips twisting wryly.

At that, Mike laughs, a smile spreading over his face at her witty remark, and El feels like she can do anything if she can get shy Mike Wheeler to smile like that. But, the next second, the smile disappears, like he caught himself or is afraid of showing too much emotion or something. El’s not sure, but she does know that he’s suddenly guarded in a way he wasn’t a moment ago and it’s giving her a little bit of whiplash. “Yeah, well, I’m just hoping I can survive this class.”

“Me, too, to be honest,” El says as she swings her backpack up onto her shoulders. “Well, I suppose I’ll see you later, yeah? I need to head to my Chemistry class.”

Mike’s smile reappears, but it’s more of a tiny grin this time than a full-blown smile. “Well, since we’re headed to the same place, I might as well join you.”

El arches an eyebrow. “Excuse me?”

Another blush spreads over Mike’s face (or maybe it’s just the first one coming back), and he looks down at his shoes, shoulders hunching a little. “Well, it’s just I noticed when you showed me your schedule this morning that we’re in the same Honors Chem section, so I just figured… you know,”
he says, shrugging one shoulder as he looks back up at her.

El smiles. “You remembered my schedule?” she asks, feeling almost touched.

At this, Mike gives a full-on shrug. “I have a pretty good visual memory, is all,” he says, dismissively.

El’s heart sinks a little. “Oh. Well, that’s neat. And, yeah, c’mon, let’s go to Chem. You lead the way, though.”

Mike looks back at her, a carefully neutral smile on his face. “Ok, after you,” he says, gesturing towards the door.

El can’t help herself, she laughs. “Ah, a gentleman. I thought those died out with the dinosaurs,” she says as she starts walking and she turns to look over her shoulder to see Mike following close behind.

“Not yet, we haven’t,” Mike says, a grin playing at the corner of his lips.

El almost sighs. God, it really, really isn’t fair how cute he is.

And, no matter what happens with her and Mike – if anything happens with her and Mike – at least the view in half of her classes is gonna be fantastic.

So that’s something, at least.

The walk from US History to Chem isn’t far, and yet, it feels like it lasts for an eternity. Mostly because Mike’s painfully aware of the weird glances being thrown their way as he and El walk down the halls together.

God, he can just see the judgy confusion in everyone’s gazes. *Why is she with him?* – *The new girl’s slumming it already.* – *Taking pity on the poor nerdy loser, I see.* Mike feels himself try to shrink, shoulders slumping, as embarrassment crawls down his spine.

God, he *knew* he shouldn’t have offered to walk to class with her. But since they are literally going to the same place, it felt both weird *and* rude not to say something. Besides, he finds himself really not wanting to be further than a foot away from her at all times. So, despite the way the rational part of his brain screamed at him to *not say the words*, Mike still found himself asking to walk with her to class in the most roundabout way possible.

*Yeah, probably shouldn’t have bothered,* he thinks, given the looks he and El are getting. If it’s any consolation, El doesn’t seem like she notices at all, walking down the hallways with her head held high, like she couldn’t care less what anyone thinks of her.

For a few seconds, neither of them talks. But the looks they’re getting from their schoolmates are making Mike’s skin crawl, so he leaps for the nearest distraction: mustering up his meager courage in order to ask the prettiest girl he’s ever met a question. “So, um, how do you like Hawkins so far?” he asks, all but tripping over his own tongue.

El glances over at him and the on her face just lights up her whole expression. “I really like it! It’s nice here,” she says. “I know, that probably sounds crazy given that I just moved here from one of
the biggest cities in the world, but it’s different in a way that I like.” She pauses, smiling. “Helps that I like the people here,” she says, one eyebrow arched teasingly.

For a moment, Mike’s heart thumps heavily in his chest – *oh god, is she talking about me?* – but he rids himself of that notion pretty quick. *No, you idiot, she’s probably talking about the girls she sat with during lunch,* his brain rationally points out. “Well, it’s for sure quieter here,” Mike says as they round the corner near where the door to the chem lab is.

“Oh, much,” El says. “I can actually hear myself *think* here without the accompanying sound of people cussing out on the street or a bajillion car horns all going off as people try to fight their way through city traffic.”

Mike cringes. “Yikes, that sounds...annoying.”

El rolls her eyes. “Seriously. I used to keep my windows shut so I wouldn’t have to hear creepy randos yelling and fighting outside our apartment building.”

They enter the half-filled chem lab and Mike quickly spots the rest of the Party up at the front. Will and Dustin are sitting at one lab table, laughing as they look at something on Dustin’s phone, and Lucas is keeping an eye out for Mike, his bag sitting on the empty lab stool so he can save it for Mike. *Not like anyone else would sit there.*

Lucas’ eyebrows rise up towards his hairline as he spots Mike walking in with the gorgeous new girl, surprise filling his gaze. A teasing grin begins to pull up the corners of his mouth, but Mike glares and Lucas manages to somehow bite the smile back before Mike looks away and down over at El. “Well, I’m gonna go...sit with my friends,” Mike says, weakly gesturing towards the tables near the front.

El blinks, like she forgot something, and glances over at the lab table where Lucas is waiting for him. A light blush crawls up her cheeks and she gives him a small, lopsided smile. “Oh, yeah, of course. Well…” she trails off, smile turning more sincere. “Thanks for walking with me to class. I’ll, um, see you around?”

The uncertainty in El’s voice – or is it hope? – gives Mike pause and he feels himself mentally stumble a bit over what it could mean. “Oh, um, yeah, sure, I guess,” he says.

El gives him one more smile. “Ok, well, I’m gonna find a seat, then. Talk to you later?” El doesn’t give Mike a chance to respond before she moves away, immediately finding another open lab stool, this one next to one of the other girls in the class, Carrie Brooks, who looks a little surprised to see the popular new girl approaching. “Hi, I’m El Hopper,” El says as she approaches. “Is this seat taken…?”

Mike watches as El and Carrie start talking and he’s amazed at how easy it is for El to just got up to people and talk to them. He’s also perplexed at how genuinely happy she sounds at meeting new people, no matter who they are.

Still, odds are it’s totally fake, no matter how real it sounds, Mike thinks as he goes to sit next to Lucas, who’s looking at him with that shit-eating grin Mike had been hoping was gone for good.

“So, nothing between you and the new girl, huh?” Lucas says under his breath.

“Oh, shut up,” Mike says, giving Lucas a swift kick to the ankle, glaring the entire time as he takes out his notebook for class.
And yet, the entire time, he can still hear El from somewhere behind him, chatting easily with someone she’s only just met, her beautiful voice echoing around the room and piercing him straight in the heart, despite the fact that he wishes he could stop it.

Yeah, he’s not just fucked.

He’s doomed.

Chapter End Notes

So, I really have no idea how long this is gonna be. I’m still on the first day of school, for crying out loud and the next chapter is still gonna be during the first day of school, haha. But I think this fic is probably gonna be about as long as ‘together, you and i’, if I had to bet.

So strap in folks, it’s gonna be a long and adorable ride...

And if you wanna come by and flail with me about mileven and Stranger Things in general, come find me on Tumblr at @fatechica! I’m always down to talk all things ST and mileven!

Til’ next time, y’all. And let me know what you think of this chapter!!
Hoo boy! Alright everyone, I’m back with another chapter! Sorry this took so long. Because my life isn’t dramatic enough, apparently, the week I got back from Japan, I came down with shingles. Which, like, never get if you can avoid it. Seriously the worst pain ever and it’s just the worst. I spent two weeks feeling exhausted and run down and in so much pain - it was just horrible.

But I finished a chapter, so things are looking up! Not a lot of actual Mileven interaction, but a lot of things are set up here.

So, enjoy!

The bell rings, signaling the end of Honors Chemistry, and El’s gaze almost immediately snaps over to where Mike is sitting a couple of rows in front of her. He’s talking to his friend, the African American boy who he greeted outside school earlier that morning, the one who’d been saving a seat for Mike and cruelly dashed El’s hopes of sharing a lab table with the cute freckled boy who made her heart go all fluttery.

It’s ok, though. From watching them interact, it’s clear the two boys are really good friends (which, aside from Mike’s horrible friendship making strategy, doesn’t surprise El in the slightest; Mike seems like a great guy to be friends with) and El would never want to get in the way of that.

Besides, it gave her a chance to meet someone new: her potential new Chem lab partner, Carrie. Smiling, El takes her eyes off of Mike where he’s putting his stuff away, whatever conversation he’s having with his friend lost in the din of everyone talking at once, and looks over at Carrie. “So, where to next for you?” El asks as she pulls her backpack up from off the ground by her feet.

At first, Carrie just blinks at her, like she’s surprised El’s even talking to her at all (and El won’t lie – that’s starting to get a little annoying – like people are never genuinely nice around here or something?). But she gives El a shy smile a split second later, the expression gently lighting up her green eyes. “Honors British Lit,” she says before biting her lip. “Um, what about you?”

El gives Carrie a wry smile. “PE,” she says, pulling a face. “Yuck.”

“I’m sorry,” Carrie says with a sympathetic look. “At least you’re almost done for the day?”

“Yeah, but I still gotta pick my elective,” El says as she slides off her stool, arms in the process of shouldering her backpack. “Any recommendations? Or anything I should avoid?”

Carrie bites her lip again – clearly a nervous gesture – her expression thoughtful, before she answers. “Well, I’m in Yearbook, which is pretty cool-” She cuts off, blushing. “But you probably think that’s lame.”

El rushes to disagree, a smile on her face. “No, that’s super neat! Everyone always loves the Yearbook when it comes out, so someone’s gotta make sure it’s pretty and cool,” El says. She
pauses, grimacing. “But I’m not much of a visual arts person.” Another pause, a thought coming to mind. “Except for clothes. I’m good at putting an outfit together.”

Carrie gives her another small smile, this one tinged with apology. “Well, there’s no Fashion elective, as far as I know, so you might be out of luck, there.”

“Damn,” El says, snapping her fingers as she starts walking, gently nudging Carrie in the direction of the door so they can leave together. “Maybe I’ll petition for one.” As she moves towards the door, El risks a quick glance over her shoulder to where Mike was sitting with his friends only to find that he and his friends are long gone. El has to fight to keep the pout off her face, as she’d been hoping for one more glimpse of the cutest boy she’s ever seen, but she consoles herself with tomorrow and the knowledge that she has three classes with him.

“That might work!” Carrie says, trying to sound hopeful for El’s sake, pulling El’s attention back to the present.

“Well, won’t know unless I try,” El says. “But, in the meantime, I’ll figure something out. Maybe I’ll check out Student Government or Debate. Those both exist here, yeah?”

Carrie lets out a nervous giggle. “Yeah, we have those.”

El grins. “Oh, excellent.” She and Carrie walk out into the hallway and El turns towards her. “Oh, hey, so, I have a question for you. And you can feel free to tell me no, ok?”

Carrie freezes, tongue flashing out quickly to wet her lips, and El’s heart breaks a little at the nervous tremor in the other girl’s eyes. “Oh?”

“Would you like to be lab partners in Chem this year? And maybe friends, too?”

A look crosses Carrie’s face, a combination of skepticism and concern. “Um, you do realize that we’re from very different worlds, yeah? I mean, you sat at the same lunch table with Stacey and Jennifer.”

El shrugs. “Yeah? So? Does that automatically mean we can’t be friends?”

Carrie lets out a wry snort. “At Hawkins High? Pretty much.”

“Well, I think that’s a stupid rule and I won’t abide by it,” El says, a smile pulling up the corners of her lips, shoulders cocking in what Hop calls her “Anne Shirley pose”, stubborn and unwilling to reconsider.

And, in return, El’s rewarded with an incredulous laugh, the look on Carrie’s face surprised like the sound caught her off guard, but she shakes her head in disbelieving amusement all the same. “Well, how about we just stick to lab partners for now and see how the friend thing goes over the rest of the year, yeah?”

El smiles even wider, letting out a giggle of her own. “Sounds fair. I’ll see you tomorrow, then, partner.”

Carrie turns to head down the hall. “Sounds good, partner.” She clutches her notebook to her chest with one hand as she points in the direction behind El. “And the gym is that way, in case you were wondering.”

“Ooh, thanks! See ya!” El says with a wave before she turns on her heel and walks away, no effort at all to move through the crowds of students on their way to their next class.
El finds the gym – and the girls’ locker room – easily enough. But it’s just inside the door to the locker room where El spots something that halts her in her tracks: a flyer, posted to a bulletin board on the hallway towards the lockers, advertising tryouts for Pep Squad.

El reaches for the flyer and un-pins it with eager fingers, eyes scanning the details – next Monday, 3:45, out on the football field – and her heart begins to race a little with excitement.

“You thinking of joining Pep Squad?”

El looks up at the familiar voice and smiles. It’s Jennifer, dressed for gym class – blonde hair up in a perky ponytail, wearing Hawkins High navy and white – and she’s smiling back with what El’s coming to realize is her usual peppiness. “Yeah, did Pep Squad back at my old school and loved it. Is it the same as Cheer Squad or are they separate?”

Jennifer giggles. “Just the one, I’m afraid. We’re something between Pep and Cheer Squads out here. So a little more athletic than Pep Squad, but not quite, like, crazy flips and lifts and stuff.”

El’s smile becomes more of a grin and she pins the flyer back up on the board. “Are you on Pep Squad, Jen?”

Jen gives a coy little shrug and moves to walk next to El as she goes to change. “Yeah, since freshman year. I’m pretty sure I’m in line to become Captain next year.” She glances ahead towards the row of lockers. “Here, I think this one’s empty.”

“Thanks,” El says as she drops her backpack on the bench in front of the open locker and starts to go through her bag for the gym clothes she stashed in there. “But that’s awesome, Jen. Squad Captain is a pretty big deal.”

Jen giggles, the sound a little nervous, and sits on the bench as El starts to change. “Well, it’s not official or anything, and I still gotta earn it.”

El opens her mouth to respond, but the sound of crashing metal interrupts her and both she and Jen turn to look.

The first thing El notices is the bright shock of long, red hair, fiery and fierce. And the next is the look of eye-rolling derision on the girl’s face. “Whoops, sorry. Didn’t mean to interrupt the Ditz Convention.”

El finds herself scowling. Well, that’s rude. “Hey, we’re not-” But before El can finish, the girl disappears, presumably to find a different row of lockers to stash her stuff after she changes.

“Oh, ignore her,” Jen says, voice dry and a little biting. “Max Mayfield is something of a grade A bitch.”

El frowns. “I wonder why,” she says as she pulls off her dress and starts wrestling her way into her sports bra.

Jen waves a hand and scoffs. “Please, don’t waste your time trying to figure out why that girl is permanently pissed off. Not worth it.”

El’s a little surprised at the vehemence in Jennifer’s voice, but she decides to drop it – some mysteries are better solved later – and continues to focus on changing. “Well, I hope you don’t mind me trying out for Pep Squad next week,” she says, getting back to the original topic.

Jen perks right back up. “Oh, not at all! I think you’d be great for the Squad. You’re already, like,
super gorgeous and in shape.”

El tosses an amused grin over her shoulder. “Jen, are you checking me out?”

“Psh, please. You’re not my type,” Jen says, grinning back. “Just pointing out the obvious. Now, hurry up and finish getting dressed. Mr. Palmino does not like to be kept waiting.”

Yeah, it’s official: doesn’t matter what state or what grade she’s in, El still hates PE. Even (or maybe especially) when it’s Physical Assessment Day – all those stupid tests and activities. Yes, because I really need to be good at picking up chalkboard erasers and placing them on a line 40 feet away one at a time while fucking sprinting back and forth, El thinks as she showers after class, rushing a bit so she can figure out which elective to try out before she commits.

She’s only gotten a couple of opportunities to go over the list she received in Homeroom earlier that morning, so El hasn’t had the time to do her normal pro/con deliberation of each to help her narrow down her final choice.

Hmm, I think I need another opinion. Arms raised above her head as she brushes her hair, El turns to where Jennifer is finishing up getting ready just a few feet away, still in the process of getting dressed. “Hey, Jen?”

Jennifer perks up at the sound of her name and looks over at El with an inquisitive smile. “Yeah?”

“I need an expert opinion,” El says, her own smile pulling at the corners of her lips. “What electives are good here? I still don’t know what to choose and I have, like, 5 minutes to figure it out.”

At this, Jennifer purses her lips, brow gently furrowed as she stands there, wearing just her jeans and her bra, blouse clutched loosely in one hand. “Well, that depends, doesn’t it? I mean, what do you like?”

“A little bit of everything, which is the problem,” El says, cringing. “From what I saw, there’s, like, 5 different things I kinda wanna do.”

Jen nods, almost sagely. “Yes, I see what you mean. Well, I can’t tell you what to take, but I can tell you what to avoid. If you value at all your reputation at this school, avoid Theater, Poetry, Chess, and A/V clubs at all costs.”

El frowns just a little – what’s so wrong with those clubs? – and she sighs. “Well, none of those were on my list at all,” she says, pausing to shrug and give Jen a small smile. “But thanks anyway.”

“Well, I tried,” Jen says with a giggle. “You could always join me in Art Studio, you know.”

“Hmm, I don’t know,” El says as she packs up her stuff. “Me and drawing are not things that go together.”

Jennifer shrugs. “Suit yourself. But you know where to find me!”

The chipper tone in Jen’s voice makes El smile even wider and she lets out a low laugh as she swings her backpack up onto her shoulder. “That I do. See you tomorrow!”

“Bye El!”
With that, El heads out of the girls’ locker room, pausing just outside the door to fish the folded up piece of paper in the front pocket of her backpack. The folds and edges of the sheet the electives are listed on are still crisp and El gently unfolds the paper as she walks.

There, facing her once more, are the handful of options she’s marked with little stars out of the entire list of about 25 or so. And, still, no consensus in sight.

El’s steps slow down until she’s just standing in the middle of the hallway. There are some people milling about, having either gotten out early from class since the bell hasn’t rung yet or just out and about on their free period, but El doesn’t really notice any of them as she chews on her lower lip, indecision gripping her tight.

And, so, El reads through her starred choices again, trying to see if she can at least come to a conclusion on which one to try today.

**Debate, Student Government, Model UN, Home Ec, and Photography.**

The first three are no surprise for why El’s considering them – she did Student Government back at her old school and she loves the idea rigor of the conversation in both Debate and Model UN.

But Student Government is also something of a popularity club and, as the new girl, El doesn’t know if she’ll be able to make inroads in with that crowd quite yet. She remembers how she used her status as the girl who was friends with *everyone* to get elected to Student Council; she doesn’t have that here quite yet.

And with Debate and Model UN, well...if she wanted to get into conversations for the spirit of debate’s sake, all she has to do is go to Hop and tell him that CCR is the worst band in the history of time and that’ll spark off a spirited argument for the ages.

So that leaves Home Ec and Photography. Home Ec is mostly a curiosity – her old school didn’t have that and it seems so... quaint that El can’t help but be a little curious.

On the other hand, though, she already knows how to cook. Living with a single dad who sometimes worked odd shifts or got wrapped up in solving a case essentially forced El to learn how to cook for herself and she’s actually gotten pretty good at it over the years. So maybe Home Ec isn’t the thing for her.

Which just leaves Photography as the last and final remaining option. It’s also the one that makes her the most nervous. Photography has always intrigued her – the idea of capturing a moment, freezing it in time for all eternity, completely unworried about anything outside that split second – well, it’s very appealing. Especially for a girl who’s all about being in the now, in making every moment count.

Photography had been an actual class at her old school, one that never fit into her schedule. She walked by the dark room a couple of times, wondering about the magic that took place behind those thick doors, and had never been brave enough to figure out how to make her way inside. *Art’s never been my thing,* she’d tell herself.

Well, *maybe it can be,* is the thought that rings loud and clear in her mind. It’s not like she needs to learn any fancy drawing techniques, or anything. She just needs, at least at the beginning, a good eye and a good sense of timing. And, well, she’s always had that.

Besides, isn’t the fact that she’s a little scared of the whole thing exactly why she should do it? Nothing ventured, nothing gained, after all.

*That settles it, then.*
There’s a little flutter of uncertainty nestled in the center of El’s heart, but the rest of her is bound and determined. With a smile, El folds up the piece of paper and slips it back into her backpack.

*Photography, here we come.*

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His US History book sits open in front of him on the table in the library he’s parked at, but Mike isn’t reading a single word of it.

And he really should. The free period he has since he doesn’t have to take PE is a blessing and Mike shouldn’t be wasting a second of it. Even though the first reading assignment for US History is only for 20 pages, Mike knows he’s going to want to start taking notes and doing whatever he can to stay as on top of the material as possible for the sake of his grade.

But, no, instead his thoughts are fully occupied with one El Hopper – to the point where he’s starting to get a little mad at himself.

Right at this current moment, he’s trying to picture what El in her PE class – what she’s doing, what she’s wearing –

(dressed in hawkins high navy and white, gym shorts the kind of short that all the popular girls somehow manage to get their hands on, hems lifted high to show off the length of her gorgeous legs; t-shirt maybe a size too small – or just perfectly fitting – outlining the lines of her body in a way that probably makes every boy want to know what she looks like beneath it; lush, wavy hair pulled up in a perky ponytail, waving around behind her temptingly, teasingly, as she runs or walks or does anything really, with skin that’s flush and glowing and – )

Mike groans and lets his head fall forward to land on his book with a dull thud, arms coming up to circle around and shield him from the outside world.

Goddammit, it hasn’t even been 6 hours and this is already getting out of control. And worse, he has no idea how to get it back in control.

This has never been a problem for Mike before. Oh, sure, he’s had his fair share of crushes in the past – all of them ending in horrible disappointment, which the pang of bruised hearts’ past takes care to remind him with cruel memory – but it’s never been like this before. Ever.

First, it doesn’t hurt (or maybe it does?) that El is literally the most gorgeous girl he’s ever seen in his entire life. She’s beauty personified, a bright and glittering presence that makes the rest of the world look gray and dull by comparison.

And second, there’s just something about her– something beyond that startling beauty of hers that has him completely and utterly ensnared. It’s in the way his stomach squirms in the most delicious way possible, in how he can’t seem to get her out of his thoughts. It’s the strange sense of I’ve been here before that settles around the back of his head, the or maybe I’ve never left, like meeting her in that crowded math classroom was just one of a countless number of ways Mike’s path has crossed with El’s – predestined, preordained, meant to be....

Only, that’s ridiculous, Mike thinks with a scoff, shaking his head against the hard surface of his textbook, which is still serving as a pillow for its lovelorn and hopeless owner. No, he’s just gone and fallen far too hard over a girl he’s just met, a girl who’s absolutely unattainable, like he’s never
learned that lesson before or anything.

She'll only break us, his heart reminds him. Just like the others. Mike’s stomach squirms again, but this time with agony. He shakes his head to clear the memories, but it just makes room for his thoughts to move back to El once more.

He finds himself thinking back to the last glimpse he’d gotten of her in Chemistry Lab, talking and laughing with Carrie Brooks like they were old, fast friends. El’s entire demeanor had been filled with nothing but gentle warmth, like she’d truly been happy talking with Carrie, who was definitely nowhere near the level of popular that girls like El exclusively dealt with in Mike’s experience. No, she’d been open and excited and welcoming, like she was the least intimidating person on the face of the planet.

It hits Mike in this moment that whatever that “something” that draws him to El is, he is absolutely not afraid of it.

And that scares the crap out of him.

This is bad, so very, very bad. For most of his life, Mike’s been afraid of pretty, popular girls. And for most of his life, that’s worked out just fine for him (with a few exceptions that really only prove that pretty, popular girls are to be avoided At All Costs). Rightfully, if life’s taught him anything, Mike should pretty much want nothing to do with El (with the exception of, say, a fantasy or two here and there – what? he’s a normal, healthy 16 year old boy and she’s very, very pretty), like the natural order of things says that he should….

The same natural order of things that says that pretty, popular girls like El shouldn’t smile at nerdy, loser boys like Mike.

And yet….

Unbidden, the memory of El smiling at him – which one? all of them – comes roaring into the forefront of his mind and Mike’s heart does that stupid, beat-skipping flutter right there in the center of his chest in the middle of the stuffy Hawkins High library.

And Mike Wheeler instantly starts smacking his head against his textbook, every hit sounding off with a dull thud that somehow resonates in between all 4 walls of the library.

“Excuse me!” a hissed voice scolds him moments later, accompanied by the sound of something thwacking against the table next to his head.

Mike instantly recognizes the harsh whisper of Mr. Fritz, the librarian, and sits up with a rush, feeling the blood drain from his face, except for the blush rising to his cheeks and the warm spot on his forehead where he was hitting it against his textbook. “Um….” is literally all Mike can say, voice stolen by his internal angst and the accompanying embarrassment at getting caught mid self-flagellation (well, really for forgetting that he was in public in the first place, but, you know, potato, potahto).

Mr. Fritz is looking down at him, arms crossed firmly over a sweater-vested chest, thick brows drawn down into stern disapproval, and Mike wants to slink down into his seat, his spine almost desperate become one with the backrest. “Son, I don’t know what your problem is, but a library is no place for these kinds of shenanigans. Ship up or ship out.”

The threat is a barely veiled one and Mike finds himself scrambling to his feet, hands grasping at his things as he tries to gather them. “Um, sorry sir” – loose papers slipping out (it’s the first day of
school, how does he already have loose papers?) – “I’ll just” – pen clattering back down to the table with a high-pitched plastic sound – “Go somewhere” – a near-crashing of his history book to the ground as it almost slips from his grip while he wrestles his backpack onto one shoulder – “...Else.”

There aren’t many people in the library, but they’re all looking straight at Mike… and he should know – he can feel their eyes on him. Mr. Fritz doesn’t even say anything. He just raises one eyebrow above the half-moon reading glasses perched on the end of his nose – a universal signal of what are you waiting for? – if ever there was one.

Mike nearly trips over his own feet in his haste to get out of the library, like he’s temporarily forgotten how to put one foot in front of the other, but he manages not to faceplant onto the worn linoleum floor and, several tense and embarrassing seconds later, Mike finds himself out in the empty hallway that connects the library to the rest of campus. For a moment, there’s only the sound of the school’s HVAC and his frustrated breathing. But then Mike lets out what can only be described as a low and piteous moan as he lets his weight fall against the wall by the door to the library, too riddled with angst to hold himself up any longer.

Mike slides down to the floor to collapse in a heap of awkward limbs and even more awkward regret and his head tilts back to thump lightly against the wall. He closes his eyes and tries to remember the breathing exercises he looked up once upon a time on the internet to help when he gets overwhelmed like this. In, two, three...out, two, three, four....in, two, three....

After a few rounds of that, Mike feels a little less like dying – but the embarrassment is still there, as well as the frustration. God, he can’t believe he made a fool of himself in front of the entire library. Ok, granted, there were only, like, 6 other people in the library, but it was the principle of the thing.

He 100% blames El Hopper for all of this. It’s her fault this is happening to him, her and her stunning beauty and gorgeous smile and delicate giggle that makes his heart soar every time he’s heard it….

Ok, stop. Mike opens his eyes and gives himself a shake. He can get this under control. It’s just...really new right now, is all. But he’s smart and determined and crafty when needed. He’ll figure out a way to make this all go away. He just needs some time.

For the moment, though, there really isn’t much Mike can do other than distract himself. And, with studying in the library no longer an option, Mike figures he might as well move on to the only thing that’s left for the day: the first meeting of A/V Club for the year.

Guess I could use the time to see how the club room held up over the summer, Mike thinks as he gets to his feet. Besides, he needs to get his copy of the key from the front office before the others get out of whatever class they have right now.

It’s with that thought that Mike all but shuffles his way down the hall and towards the front office. With the halls pretty much empty and the school really not being that big, it only takes Mike a minute or so before he’s walking in through the front office near the school’s entrance.

The front desk receptionist, a woman around his mom’s age with her blonde hair pulled back into a low ponytail, looks up at Mike’s entrance and gives him a friendly smile. “Mr. Wheeler, wasn’t it just yesterday you were walking in through that door instead of a few months ago? And, I swear, you’ve somehow managed to grow a couple more inches over the summer.”

Mike smiles, a little chagrined. “Hi, Ms. Bennett.” The front office staff are no strangers to Mike – or the Party, for that matter. They’re used to helping out with whatever the teachers need – though Dustin tends to carry out his volunteer assignments with a flair for the dramatic that has the staff
rolling their eyes even as they’re smiling – and, though it’s gotten them a bit of a reputation as a bunch of brown nosers, making friends with the front office has certainly had its advantages.

“I take it you’re here for the key to the A/V Club room?”

As A/V Club President, Mike’s entitled to borrow the key to unlock the room… but because he’s him and the office staff trust him, he gets to keep it for the entire year. “Yep. Just want to check the room to make sure everything’s ok before Club starts.”

Ms. Bennett gives him a look beneath arched brows as she reaches for the handle of one of her desk drawers. “Getting started a little early, aren’t you?”

Mike looks at the clock, showing that it’s only 15 minutes into the last period of the day and almost a full half-hour before the elective period begins. He shrugs as he turns back to Ms. Bennett. “I have a free period my last class and, since it’s only the first day, there’s not much homework yet.”

The sound of the metal door clattering as it opens is a little jarring, but Mike ignores it as he watches Ms. Bennett reach in for a little folio that has various keys in it. “I suppose that’s a fair enough reason why you aren’t studying,” she says as she starts filling out the sign-out sheet for the key. “Probably shouldn’t make it a habit, though. You’re a junior this year. It only gets harder the older you get, you know.”

Mike shrugs. “Yeah, I know,” he says as he waits for Ms. Bennett to pass over the sheet so he can sign it. “It’s really just because it’s the first day, promise.”

“You’re lucky you have one of those faces, Mr. Wheeler,” Ms. Bennett says, passing the sheet over to him to rest on the small counter that shields her desk. “Now, sign here,” she says as she points with the pen. “And, for heaven’s sake, don’t lose the key.”

Mike flashes her what he hopes is his most winning grin. “Would I do that?”

An arched eyebrow is his response. “No, but if Mr. Henderson gets his hands on it….”

Mike quickly signs for the key and passes the sheet back over. “I swear,” he says, holding up his hand. “Dustin won’t lay a finger on it.”

“He better not,” Ms. Bennett says. “That key’s signed out to you and you only.”

Mike grabs the key, which was resting next to the sign-out sheet, and smiles even wider. “And that’s the way it’s going to stay. Thanks, Ms. Bennett.”

Ms. Bennett gives him a smile in welcome and Mike promptly turns on his heel and leaves the front office. Compared to the foot-dragging shuffle he did getting to the front office, there’s a much peppier step to his walk as he lets his feet carry him to the A/V room.

The A/V room is just… one of those places. A home away from home, in a lot of ways. It’s a place, like the basement at his house, where he and the Party can just be, without worrying about bullies or people making fun of them. They can be as loud and nerdy and dorky as they want in those four walls.

Mike loves it. He loves playing with electronics and hooking up equipment and figuring out how things worked and why. A/V club is a way for Mike to indulge in both his natural curiosity about the world and his need to fix things, to exert some measure of control over a life that feels increasingly out of control.
It’s for that exact reason that Mike sincerely hopes no one new joins A/V club. Oh, sure, Lucas and Dustin are always going on about how they should try to get new members to change things up or grow their “influence” (which always made Mike roll his eyes because, honestly, what influence?), but Mike knows it’d be a horrible idea. Change has never exactly worked out well for them in the past (see the change from middle school to high school, anyone?).

The only exception to that rule is when Max moved to Hawkins in 8th grade and started dating Lucas. She joins A/V Club sometimes, but she mostly hangs back and watches the boys all geek out while adding snarky comments here and there.

Max is...well, she’s not nice. At least, not traditionally. But Mike’s come to like having her around. She’s smart and snarky and can take it as well as she can dish it, which is always good in a group of friends that just lives to give each other shit. But, most of all, Max is steadfast and loyal and just about the best person Mike can think to have in their corner. She’s fiercely protective in the best way possible and, even if only in his head, Mike can admit that he loves her like a sister.

Wonder if she’ll join us today? Mike thinks as he approaches the door to the A/V clubroom. He mentally shrugs a moment later – he supposes he’ll find out soon enough what the answer is – and focuses on unlocking the door.

It’s clearly been a few months since anyone’s opened this door – maybe even since the last time Mike locked up at the end of sophomore year – because the lock sticks a little. Mike’s forced to jiggle the key a bit, like that’ll knock any wedged dust or gunk loose from inside of it. But it seems to work and a couple of seconds later, the key turns and Mike can feel the lock sliding free before he pushes open the door and reveals one of his homes away from home.

Mike wrinkles his nose, though, a couple of seconds later. With the door wide open, the dark interior of the A/V room smells... musty, stale air and dusty wiring. Now it’s really obvious that no one’s been in here in months. Taking a careful breath through his mouth (mostly so he doesn’t accidentally inhale a breath full of dust and start sneezing everywhere – Mike has a hard time being graceful while standing still and he’s been told that he looks like a giraffe having a seizure when he sneezes, so... yeah), Mike reaches into the dark room and flips on the light so he can take stock of the situation.

Everything’s just how he left it months ago. The only sign that something is different is the empty wastebasket by the door. The Party is always bringing in snacks and sodas and pretty much leaves the garbage can at least half-full after every club meeting – the last meeting of the year was no exception, if Mike remembers correctly.

So someone has been in here since he last locked up, but not since, Mike would wager. There are 5 chairs neatly tucked in around a center, rectangular table, with shelves and tables lining the medium-ish sized room, filled with discarded electronics and various tools. The floor is a dirty-bathwater grey linoleum, the tiles worn and aged, and the long strip of fluorescent lighting above really does the drab colors of the room no favors.

But, it’s home of sorts and Mike’s happy to see it regardless. When he looks in here, he doesn’t see the run-down furniture or the uninspiring walls or the clutter of wires and equipment and random electronic detritus – no, he sees freedom and exploration, science and curiosity and acceptance all rolled into one.

Mike loves it in here, so much that he would rather keep this all to himself than share it with anyone undeserving.

With a small hum of contentment, Mike moves into the room. He dumps his stuff on the table and
immediately sets about on sorting through some of the clutter, rediscovering what the Party had been working on or tinkering with last spring.

As he does this, Mike finds himself thinking about what supplies or parts kits they could maybe ask for this year. Last year, they’d spent a good portion of the year building and tweaking their own two-way radios. Maybe they could try for, like, a stereo system or something this year. He knows there’s not a lot of money or anything in the budget for A/V club, but the Party has gotten good at stretching funds past their breaking point and finding creative, alternative workarounds for their problems. *Hmm, maybe I’ll bring it up with the vice-principal or something,* Mike thinks as he works.

The rest of the hour flies by and, before he knows it, the bell rings out and signals the transition over to the elective period. It doesn’t take long from there for Dustin and Lucas to come sauntering in. “Hey, look! Mr. President, hard at work,” Dustin says by way of a greeting as he grabs a chair and all but falls down into it.

Mike rolls his eyes and puts down the wire strippers he was holding in his hand. “Ha ha, very funny. I decided to use my free to make sure everything was still in working order.” He pauses, looking around. “Where’s Will?”

There’s more scraping of metal against the linoleum as both Mike and Lucas follow Dustin’s example and sit down around the table. “He’s talking with Ms. Faith. Should be here soon I think, though,” Lucas says.

Mike grins. “Gonna split his elective between this and Art Studio again, huh?”

“Mike, c’mon,” Dustin says with a flat stare, lips pulled up in a small smirk. “It’s *Will* we’re talking about here.”

Art Studio meets every day and students who choose that as an elective are *supposed* to come to every class. But the Art Studio teacher, Ms. Faith, makes an exception for Will so he can join A/V club during its weekly meeting – mostly because he helps teach a lot of the other students various art techniques and there’s not much that Ms. Faith has been able to teach him. Plus, Will is a model student and Mike’s convinced that his small best friend could get away with murder under the right circumstances.

“Right, sorry,” Mike says with a roll of his eyes, tone sardonic and dry. “I don’t know where my mind is today.”

Lucas waggles his eyebrows. “With your new *girlfriend,*” he taunts.

Dustin giggles. “Saw her in PE, Mike. Looking pretty hot, if I do say so myself. You’re missing out, man.”

Mike blushes to the roots of his hair, which totally undercuts the glare he’s leveling at both Lucas and Dustin. “We are not talking about El Hopper in this room, ok? Please?”

Will chooses this moment to walk through the door and, having clearly caught the end of Mike’s sentence, a toothy grin spreads over his face. “Ooh, we talking about Mike’s new crush?”

Mike groans and lets his head fall forward once again. “No, no we are not!” he all but yells into the table before he sits up with a rush. “That’s it, I’m declaring this room a El-Hopper-Free Zone. She is not allowed to exist within these four walls for my sanity. Is that understood?”

The others exchange amused glances as Will sits down, all of them grinning and trying their best to control it. “Yessir, understood,” Dustin says, teasingly compliant. “From this moment on, El Hopper
will never appear on this side of the threshold.”

Mike tries not to groan, but he allows himself to hope anyway. The A/V Club room is his one space in this godforsaken school that’s his. He won’t have El invade this, too, like she’s invaded his thoughts. He just won’t.

*(he will, of course, change his mind once an unstoppable force meets an unmovable rock in the form of beguiling lips and devilish fingers, exhilarating secrets and sleights of hand, frenzied kisses that set him on fire and eyes that bewitch him and drive him mad. but, well…

we’re getting ahead of ourselves.)*

It doesn’t take El long to find out that getting to the police station from school is so easy, it’s almost laughable.

When the bell rings and signals the end of the first day of school, El’s all smiles, still riding the giddy high of discovering what she hopes is a new hobby. Around her in the Photography classroom, some of the more experienced students are exiting the darkroom; others still are working on project proposals at large drafting tables. And all the new students – mostly freshman, though there are a few sophomores with El being the oldest – are getting up from desks after listening to a lecture from Mr. Weiss, the Photography teacher.

El’s brain is swimming in terms like “shutter speed” and “aperture” and she’s already mentally searching the remaining packed boxes for where she knows is her dad’s old film camera (and she knows it’s there because she’s the one who packed the damn thing). She’s pretty sure she’s narrowed it down to one of two boxes by the time she stands up from the desk she’s been sitting at for most of the past hour and heads out of the classroom.

The hallways are swimming with energetic teenagers, the air filled with the cacophony of excited whoops and liberated laughter – the sounds of reluctant students being relieved from the torture of the school day. There’s a skip in El’s step as she weaves through the crowds, like nothing or no one can touch her.

Honestly, it’s been such an amazing first day. El’s met all these new people and learned all these new things… yes, she’s something of a nerd – she can’t help it, really. She’s always been someone who’s loved discovering new things, who seeks out new experiences and knowledge like a magpie with shiny things. And she refuses to hide it. Why bother? Life’s too short, after all.

El’s still all smiles as she walks through the front doors of the high school and emerges beneath the bright, September Indiana sun. For a moment, El just closes her eyes and enjoys the feeling of the sun on her bare skin, not caring about the streams of students moving past her. But she can’t linger long – Hop is expecting her and he doesn’t really like to be kept waiting.

With a sigh, El slips her backpack off one shoulder so she can grab her phone from the front pocket. And it’s after she does a quick Google map search for the Hawkins Police Station that she discovers just how easy it is to get there from the school.

*Head down Old School Road, turn right on Main Street, and walk half a mile. Can’t miss it; should be obvious, El thinks with an amused smirk. For a girl who’d become an expert at navigating her way around NYC, who’s used to measuring distances in multiple blocks each at least a quarter of a
mile, getting to her dad’s workplace in Hawkins is easy peasy.

El only keeps her phone out long enough to orient herself before she puts it back in her backpack and heads off. She dodges both fellow students and cars as she cuts through the parking lot and then she’s on sidewalk after a quick hop over a row of concrete parking blocks. All the while, she’s looking forward to a peaceful walk where she can just exist in her thoughts and maybe take in the sights a bit, as they are.

Only, a peaceful walk isn’t in the cards for her today.

El’s walked maybe 100 feet down the sidewalk away from school when a honking horn accompanied by the deep growl of a muscle car’s engine sounds off near to her right. The suddenness of the noise makes her jump, jolting her out of her thoughts, and she’s both curious and annoyed as she looks to see what’s going on.

The first thing she notices isn’t the driver of the car, but the car itself. Whoever’s driving is just letting the engine’s idle power propel it along, keeping pace with her walking speed, the engine rumbling low and smooth. El lets her eyes trace along the lines of the car, taking in the shiny, black paint and the red, side racing stripe that bisects the car along the horizontal, making it look even sleeker and faster than El bets it already is.

And then El lets her eyes drift up to the driver and a sinking feeling immediately settles low in her gut. The guy behind the wheel is leaning out the open window, arm folded and propped along the top of the door, showing off the white sleeve of his navy letterman jacket. His blond hair shines beneath the light of the sun where it’s slicked back away from his face, highlighting traditional good looks – strong jaw and brow framing an aqualine nose, skin lightly tanned and smooth. He looks like a model of an American high school boy, the kind that girls everywhere lust after and fall head over heels for, the kind of boy that tends to be found in teen rom-com dramas and in the pages of teen magazines everywhere.

And he’s looking at El with a smile that is going for charming, but El can see the leer in his eyes, the way his gaze shamelessly rakes over her body, and her skin crawls.

The boy, who’s at least as a junior, if not a senior, lets out a low, appreciative whistle and smiles even wider, showing off perfectly straight, white teeth. “Well, don’t you make a pretty picture, walking here by yourself. Are all the girls from New York as smoking as you are? Or are you just special, because damn, girl,” he says. Again, he’s going for charming, but the lecherous shines through, complete with a kind of entitlement that has El’s blood boiling.

God, she can practically see the way he’s fantasizing about her and it’s just about the most disgusting thing she’s ever experienced in her entire life. Seriously, she’s going to need to take a shower when she gets home, she’s so grossed out right now.

(also, there’s the undeniable, insidious undercurrent of fear that flows alongside the blood in her veins, a heightened sense of ‘this boy is up to no good’, every instinct in el’s body is screaming at her to get away and it’s only because she knows how it can be – tiny girl like her, facing off against a bigger guy in his car, so many ways for that to not work out in her favor – that she maintains firm control of herself. no, she can take care of herself, if push came to shove… but it’s best not to tempt fate.)

“Can I help you?” El asks, keeping her face carefully neutral, the only hint of her true emotions in the lone eyebrow that arches delicately above her cautiously curious gaze.

“Saw the new girl walking by herself and thought I’d introduce myself,” the guy says, keeping one
eye on the road as he makes sure the car keeps pace with her speed. “I know you’re the mysterious El Hopper everyone’s talking about. I’m Zach – Zach Mercer.”

El’s other eyebrow joins its twin in arching high on her forehead. “And that’s supposed to impress me?” she asks, lips twitching as she fights to keep from frowning.

“Hmm, how about if I told you I’m on the Varsity Football team as Wide Receiver and, due to my amazing skills, we made it to the semi-finals for the State Championship?”

Yeah, nothing could impress El less. God, she wishes guys like this would die out due to natural selection, or something. “Oh yeah, real impressive,” El says, her voice heavily laden with sarcasm and, somehow, she keeps herself from rolling her eyes.

But, with the way Zach smiles at her, it’s clear that the tone of her voice has gone right over his head. “Well, I don’t like to brag, but…” Which, ironic, considering he just bragged about it.

Seriously, is this guy for real?

“Well, it’s been nice to meet you, Zach,” El says. “I certainly appreciate the introduction. I don’t know what I would have done without it.” Oh yeah, Sarcasm! El is here to stay – which is a shame because this guy just isn’t getting it.

Sarcasm is wasted on the feeble-minded.

“Hmm, maybe you can show me how much you appreciate it by letting me give you a ride,” Zach says, eyebrows quirking with suggestion, voice laden with blatant sexuality, and El knows the ride he’s talking about is not just the one in his car.

Negative infinity points for complete and utter lack of subtlety. “I think I’ll pass,” El says. “Don’t want to overwhelm myself, now.”

“Aw, c’mon, babe, help a guy out, here. Where are you headed?”

At this, El can’t help but smile, the curve of her grin sharp and mocking. “The police station.”

Zach sucks in a sharp breath, his smile turning predatory. “Ooh, playing hard to get. I like it – it’s a challenge. No, really, where are you headed? I’d love to give you a ride, get to know you better….”

Ok, how does any girl fall for this? El honestly hopes no one does. “No, really, I’m headed to the police station. I’m sure you’ve heard about my dad? You know, the new police chief?” El doesn’t at all feel bad about the way Zach blanches a little beneath his tan.

“Oh, um, yes, that’s right,” Zach says, voice rough with what El hopes is fear. But the look in his eyes tells her that he’s not deterred. No, the fear is only an obstacle for him to overcome and El knows this isn’t going to be the last time this douchebro comes onto her. And, sure enough, that shadow of fear disappears in an instant and he winks at her.

El wants to throw up.

“Well, maybe next time. You know I’d give you a ride almost anywhere you want to go,” Zach continues, lips curling up in a grin. “See you around, babe.”

And then he drives off, picking up speed, engine roaring as he steps on the gas, leaving El gratefully alone once more.
El waits until Zach’s car is out of sight before her face morphs into a moue of disgust, lips curling down in a frown as her nose scrunches and her brow furrows. Seriously, she wouldn’t touch Zach Mercer with a 10-foot pole if they were the last two people on earth… or something along those lines. She’s probably mixing metaphors, but whatever. Zach Mercer is gross and disgusting and so completely and utterly the opposite of her type, it’s not even funny.

Naturally, on the tail end of that thought, comes the thought of what her type really is and, before she knows it, she’s thinking about Mike. Again.

A dreamy smile crosses her lips as the image of Mike in her mind’s eye erases the gross aftertaste of her encounter with Zach. Mike couldn’t be more her type if he tried. He’s sweet and smart and funny and adorable and beautiful beyond measure. He didn’t leer at her during any of the classes they shared, he made her laugh with his quiet, dry wit, and just the sight of him is enough to make her entire body feel like champagne bubbles are sparkling beneath the surface of her skin, her heart racing and fluttering as her stomach swoops and makes her feel like she can fly.

Seriously, why would she want someone like Zach when Mike Wheeler is a real person and not just some perfect wish El’s dreamed up?

I mean, honestly.

El lets thoughts of Mike carry her the rest of the way to the police station, dreamy smile firmly affixed as she mentally replays every moment she spent in Mike’s presence earlier that day. The scenery passes by her in a blur as El starts thinking about tomorrow, about the next time she’s going to get to talk to Mike again….

What should she wear? What should she say? God, she just wants him to like her, but she wants to do this right. She wants Mike to look at her and see someone he can be with, someone he can trust with his heart. She’s never wanted anything as much as she wants this and it’s scary just how fast this has overtaken her. But El’s never let a little fear stop her before – see how she overcame her hesitancy over taking Photography not two hours ago – and she’s not about to start now.

Just go slow, yeah? Take a little time and be sure, her heart whispers and El’s inclined to listen. After all, it’s only been 8 hours. There’s time to figure this out – it doesn’t do to overly dwell on this now.

Which is good, because El’s fast approaching the police station and if she doesn’t want her dad to tease her endlessly about ridiculously cute boys, she’s going to have to button this up and fast.

The Hawkins police station is a low, one story building parked on the corner of the block, painted in drab beige with simple glass double doors allowing people in and out. El marches fearlessly through those doors. She’s aware that a couple of people are giving her odd looks, but she ignores them as she goes to the reception desk, a smile ready on her face for the grandmotherly woman sitting behind it.

The woman looks up from the computer screen on her desk, head tilted from where she was peering through the bottom half of her glasses to properly read the screen, and there’s a kind, if confused smile on her face. “Hi dear, is there something I can help you with?”

There’s concern in the older woman’s eyes and El feels a familiar warmth envelop her. Safe, that’s what that is. She’s in a police station and she’s safe. It’s a feeling born of a lifetime of spending hours in whatever precinct her dad worked in, in how her dad’s partner and squadmates all felt like part of
her extended family. It’s in the sounds and smells around her that have lulled her to sleep too many times to count – the ringing of the phone, the smell of day old coffee and gunpowder, the metallic slide of file cabinets opening and closing, the jangle of metal and holsters.

It’s home and the last bit of homesickness washes away in this moment. Is it weird to think of a police station as home? Maybe. Do I care? Not At All.

But, the older woman sitting at the receptionist’s desk is still looking at her, waiting for an answer. “Hi, I’m here looking for my dad.” A brief look of pity crawls into the woman’s gaze and it doesn’t take a genius to know what she must be thinking. “Oh, um, no, he’s not, like, a criminal or anything,” El rushes to say. “I’m El Hopper and my dad’s-

“Ah, the new chief’s daughter,” the older woman says, relief breaking through her features as she smiles even wider. “Chief said you’d be swinging by after school.” She gets to her feet and motions for El to start following. “You find the station ok?”


“Not hard to find anything in a town like Hawkins,” the older woman says as she leads El into the station. “I’m Flo, by the way. It’s my job to try and keep your father in line.”

El finds herself grinning. “Good. He likes to think he’s the boss, but, really, he needs someone to boss him around, instead. Otherwise the power goes to his head and nobody wants that.”

Flo lets out a barking laugh, like she’d been caught off guard with humor, and gives El a conspiratorial smile. “Oh, I like you. I think, between the two of us, we can manage him just fine.”

“Don’t tell him I told you this,” El says, giggling. “But he’s really a big softy at heart. Don’t be afraid to tug on those heartstrings. I give you full permission.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Flo says with an eyebrow arched in mischief. A moment later, her steps slow and she stops in front of the door, El hot on her heels. Flo raises a hand and knocks on the closed, wooden door. There’s a holder for a name placard on the front, but it’s empty. Probably haven’t made one with Dad’s name on it, El thinks as she watches.

“Yeah?” a familiar, gruff voice calls from within – Hop.

Flo opens the door and peeks her head inside, body blocking El’s view of inside the room. “Your daughter’s here to see you.”

Even from out in the hallway, El can hear Hop’s sigh of relief, like her arrival is a reprieve from whatever is going on inside his new office. “Thanks, Flo. Let her in.”

Flo steps aside and El gives Flo a grateful smile before she steps into her dad’s office. Only, he’s the only one in there. He’s sitting behind a desk, facing a computer screen, with a much younger officer sitting next to him, like he’s been showing her dad the ropes, or something. Hop’s not looking at the computer screen or the guy sitting next to him. Instead, his gaze is fixed on the door, face lighting up as he sees her. “Ellie, sweetheart! You’re here!”

El grins. “Gee, Dad, you don’t need to sound so excited.”

Hop looks almost offended. “What, I can’t be happy to see my daughter?”

“Not when it’s clear you’re trying to avoid doing your work,” El quips back.
The guy sitting next to Hop chokes on the sudden laugh that bubbles out of him and he coughs in a futile attempt to try and cover it up. A glare crosses over Hop’s face as he looks over. “You know what, Harrington, your discretion could use some work.”

“Sorry, sir,” the other officer says, a grin twisting up the corners of his mouth.

“Yeah, yeah…” Hop says, rolling his eyes. “Anyway, Harrington, this is my daughter, El.”

“You can call me ‘Steve’,” Harrington – Steve – says, coming around the desk to shake her hand.

“Nice to meet you, Steve,” El says, taking in the young man as she shakes his hand. He’s probably about 5-6 years older than her – maybe fresh out of college? – traditionally handsome, especially with that smile and that hair. He may not be El’s type, but, lord, what girl wouldn’t want to run her fingers through that hair?

“I was just trying to show your old man the computer system we use around here,” Steve says, hooking his fingers in the loops his gun belt has been fed through.

“I take it the key word there is ‘trying’?” El asks as she lets her backpack slowly drop from her shoulders so she can set it on the floor. She winces a bit as the weight is lifted from her shoulders – damn heavy textbooks – and takes care not to drop all her school stuff on the ground.

Steve laughs at El’s unsubtle dig at her father – all in good faith, of course – and he shakes his head. “Oh, I bet you’re trouble.”

“Actually, she’s surprisingly well-behaved. Don’t know where she got that from,” Hop says before he sighs. “Harrington, why don’t we pick this back up tomorrow, yeah? I could use a break and I think your shift ends soon.”

Steve turns and looks back at Hop, shrugging casually with a small smile on his face. “Sure thing, boss. See you tomorrow if I don’t see you before I head home.” He spares one last glance at El, friendly smile still on his face. “Nice to meet you, El. See you around.”

“Bye Steve,” El says with a bright giggle. She watches Steve walk out of the room and waits until it’s just her and her dad in the office before she turns to look at him. “He’s pretty cute,” she says, lips curled up in a grin, waiting for–

“Don’t. Even. Think about it,” Hop says, jabbing a finger in her direction. “I know you’re joking – I can tell from that stupid mischievous look in your eye – but you can’t do this shit to me, ok?”

El laughs as she flops into one of the chairs on the other side of her dad’s desk. “Aww, ok, I promise. Sorry, I just couldn’t resist, though.”

Hop gives her a flat look. “Don’t make it a habit. I don’t want to have to arrest one of my guys for being with a teenage girl, you hear me?”


Hop snorts. “Good to know.” He pauses, a smirk taking over his face. “So, speaking of which...you never did tell me what had you turning that lovely shade of tomato earlier this morning.”

It’s El’s turn to be leveling out flat glares. “Dad, no. We’re not talking about this.” Really, this is what she wanted to avoid. It’s one thing to tease her dad about guys. It’s another thing entirely to seriously be talking to him about this. Especially there really is a cute boy – a really, really cute boy, El thinks, Mike’s image leaping to the forefront of her mind – and it’s just way too soon to be talking
“Ok, cute boys are off topic.” Hop pauses, grin somehow ratcheting up to unforeseen levels of annoying. “You are going to let me know when you do decide to start dating again, aren’t you? Or am I going to have install cameras to catch your suitors coming to pick you up for a night out?”

At that, El harrumphs. “Wouldn’t you like to know?” she asks, sly smile on her face as she crosses her arms over her chest.

“Jesus, you really are my daughter, aren’t you? Fucking karma,” Hop mumbles under his breath. He shakes his head a second later and smiles. “So, besides cute boys, who may or may not exist, how was your first day at school?”

El lets thoughts of Mike mostly fall to the wayside – only mostly though; after all, Mike’s in half of her classes so she can’t completely stop thinking about him – as she begins to regale her dad with stories of her first day at Hawkins High. “Well, first, I just wanted to let you know that I’m going to borrow your camera because, believe it or not, I signed up for Photography as my elective….”

And as El tells Hop about her first day at school, one thing is abundantly clear: she can’t wait to see what tomorrow is going to bring.

Mike doesn’t think he’s ever been as exhausted at the end of a first day of school in his entire life as he is right now and he groans when his head finally hits the pillow at the end of the day.

Thankfully, since getting home after A/V club, his mom has mostly left him alone. Other than coming down for dinner, Mike was able to duck out of talking with his mom by claiming that he had, quote, “a mountain of school work” since “junior year is no joke,” hoping that his mom would buy it since he’s a horrible liar.

It worked. Mike was allowed to pretty much scarf down dinner – not that it mattered much seeing as it was only his mom and Holly with him, his dad who-the-fuck-knows-where – and seal himself up in his room immediately afterwards.

Once up in his room, Mike did his homework, but he finished it in only a few hours, leaving him with the rest of the evening with only his own thoughts for company. He tried to distract himself with video games and the internet, but nothing held his attention for long enough and Mike flitted from thing to thing until he could barely keep his eyes open somewhere around 11:30.

It didn’t take him long to get ready for bed – a quick change into his PJs, a stop by the bathroom to brush his teeth – and now Mike’s letting himself sink into the blissfully soft surface of his bed, surrounded by flannel sheets and down pillows. He remembers to set his alarm, sitting up briefly so he can plug his phone in, but that’s only a temporary distraction as his brain swirls with thoughts of the first day of junior year.

And, because he can’t fucking stop it from happening, pretty much every thought he has revolves around El. His whole first day of school is colored through that lens, rendering everything in vibrant technicolor, like his life before had been in black and white.

She’s there in all of his memories of the day, even ones she wasn’t even there for. Mike wishes he knew how to stop it, but he’s quickly coming to the conclusion that he’s powerless. Once again, a pretty girl has ensnared him and he has no idea how to get himself free.
Fucking great, Mike thinks with a sigh that trails off into a groan of despair. Seriously, it’s only been one day of school. How’s Mike supposed to survive the rest of the school year with his dignity intact?

Mike has no clue, but he better figure it out... and fast.

Even under the oppressive weight of anxiety and worry, exhaustion from a crazy roller coaster of a day finally wins out and Mike lets himself drift off to sleep. His problems will still be there when he wakes up, after all – no sense in trying to solve them when he’s half out of his mind with fatigue.

In the meantime, though, Mike’s about to discover a different problem: dreams invaded by the prettiest girl Mike’s ever seen, dreams that make him yearn and crave with fervent longing...

Dreams that fill him with the most painful hope despite his best efforts to squash it. Because, at Mike’s core, as much as he tries to hide it, he’s an incurable romantic.

And so, he dreams and he longs and, above all, he hopes.

Oh, how he hopes.

Chapter End Notes

So... what’d you think? I had fun writing this chapter, so I’m hoping you all had as much fun reading it. And with this, it’s the end of the first day of school! Only took me three chapters, lmao. But, I guess it wouldn’t be one of my fics if I didn’t get wordy, now would it?

Shit’s hopefully starting to calm down a bit, so I think I should have the next chapter out in a couple of weeks or so. Catch y’all on the flip side! And if you wanna bug me about mileven, come find me on tumblr! I’m @fatechica there, so hit me up!

Up next, Max gets her moment to make an official appearance and El continues to take people by surprise....
getting into the swing of the routine (and of love)

Chapter Notes

I'm back, y'all!! And it looks like I'll be posting a new chapter every three weeks or so? If my schedule the past few chapters is anything to go by?

(I'm blaming my super busy work life on that one. And it's going to continue to be insane for a few more weeks.)

I'd originally wanted this chapter to have a lot more in it, so consider it to be part 1 of 2 (i know, i know, me not getting to everything i wanted to? SHOCKER.) But I think I set it up pretty well to lead into the next chapter, so hopefully it won't be too jarring. But I hope y'all enjoy it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tuesday dawns as bright and exciting as Monday and El is a giddy, bundle of energy as she practically bounces out of bed.

Now, El’s not exactly what one would call a “morning person” – she loves sleeping in as much as the next teenager. But when there’s something exciting and new in her life? Not even the gravitational pull of her comfy, comfy bed can keep her down.

Yesterday, it was the thrill and excitement of a new school and all that entailed that had her going like she’d had 2 cups of coffee while she slept.

And today? Oh, that new school excitement is still there. But what’s really fueling El’s eagerness today is that, in a few short hours, she’s going to get to see Mike again.

God, getting desperate much?

And there’s the derisive voice in the back of her head, the one that traffics in fear and self-doubt to get her to dampen her excitement. Well, not today. El sniffs at the voice as she heads into the shower, all but rolling her eyes. Oh, hush. He’s cute and he makes me feel all tingly. What’s wrong with wanting to be near someone like that?

There’s no argument from the voice (and maybe it should worry El that she’s having arguments with parts of her personality, but whatever) and El takes satisfaction in the victory...even though it’s just against the voice in her head. But still, El goes about the rest of her morning with a skip in her step and a smile on her face regardless.

After her shower, El stands in front of her closet – robe cinched tightly around her waist, hair wrapped up in a towel – and surveys her options.

Hmm, what am I feeling like today?

It’s one of El’s favorite things about clothes: that she can use them to emphasize any part of her personality she wants or to help her be a little bit like someone she’s not. Clothes let her be all these things for a little while with no permanent changes. It’s why her own personal style is so eclectic – she doesn’t want to be restricted in being the person she wants to show the world.
But, it does make it harder to pick out what she wants to wear sometimes. Especially if El’s not entirely sure what mood she’s in.

But, after a little soul-searching and a lot of rifling through her closet, El eventually settles on a variation of what she calls her “punk princess” look: ripped, sheer black tights; red and navy blue plaid pleated skirt; and a black, scoop neck tank-top with the Wonder Woman symbol emblazoned across her chest. She pairs the whole ensemble with a pair of Doc Martins and pulls her hair up in a tight, high ponytail.

After a quick detour to the bathroom to do her makeup, which is really just lip gloss and thick eyeliner to really lean into the whole “punk rock” look, El heads downstairs feeling as kickass and spunky inside as she looks outside. But the thing about wearing Doc Martins is that her steps become that much heavier and El all but charges down the stairs, boots clomping on the steps.

She bounds into the kitchen to see her dad in the exact same spot he was at this time yesterday: at the kitchen table, coffee mug in hand. “Morning, Dad!!”

Hop looks up from the newspaper he’s reading, a teasing smile already on his face. “Ah, I knew today was gonna be one of your punk days.”

El returns the grin with a smirk of her own. “What gave it away?” she asks as she starts getting a bowl of cereal together.

“You tromping down the stairs in those boots like an elephant, is what,” Hop says before he takes a sip of his coffee, turning his gaze back towards the newspaper. “So, I see you’re going with the shock tactic for being the new kid today.”

El snorts, one hand holding the refrigerator door open while she reaches in for the milk. “Oh, please. This is pretty tame.”

“Yes, for Brooklyn, maybe. But not for small town Indiana. Not too many teenagers out there dressing like they belong in an MTV music video or something.”

“MTV?” El repeats with incredulity. She tosses the milk back in the fridge and turns to sit down at the table to eat. “Wow, Dad, dated references much? Don’t you know that music videos air on Youtube these days?”

Hop rolls his eyes. “Oh, my most humble apologies for not keeping up with the times while I was working to keep the streets of New York safe,” he says, brimming with a level of melodrama that has El giggling.

“Dad, stop being silly,” El manages to get out through her laughter.

Hop just winks at her. “Never, kiddo. It’s my prerogative as a dad to be endlessly silly.” He shrugs, casually helpless. “Besides, it’s in the Dad Handbook.”

It’s El’s turn to roll her eyes. “Well, if it’s in the Handbook, how can I possibly criticize?”

That earns El a laugh. “Exactly!”

El lets out a playful groan, but says nothing more on the topic as she quickly eats her cereal before it gets too soggy, letting her dad go back to drinking his coffee.

The rest of the morning is pretty quiet as they finish up breakfast and then pile into Hop’s brand new police cruiser to head out for the day. And before El knows it - after Hop finishes dropping her off
and she gives him a quick kiss on the cheek, trying not to pay attention as everyone stares at the police car idling in front of the school - she’s walking in through the front doors of Hawkins High once more.

Only this time, she has at least some idea of where she’s going and it only takes her a minute or so to get to her locker. Along the way, El can feel eyes on her, staring at her outfit – evaluating, judging, curious, some with even a little approval. But woven all within them is the common thread of shock – this isn’t how things are normally done, girls don’t dress this way – and the stares have a hint of gaping that El finds not a little tiresome.

_Hmm, seems like Dad was right. Guess this isn’t usual for a place like this._ But, really, it’s ridiculous. It’s not like El has her hair in spikes or half shaved or she’s wearing a mesh tank top with barely anything underneath, or anything. She’s wearing a nerdy tank top, a skirt that covers everything (though it might be generous to say that it comes down to her mid-thigh), and black tights that, while strategically ripped, actually do a decent job of covering everything the skirt doesn’t.

_Seriously, this isn’t, like, Rocky Horror or anything. Now that’s wild._

El sighs and resolves to ignore the stares. By the time she’s gotten to her locker, she’s mostly tuned them out and is happily humming along to herself as she thinks about what she wants to stash in her locker versus what she wants to keep with her in her backpack, all the while keeping an eye out for Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome.

(Yes, she has a nickname for Mike that, if she knew him better, he would totally and completely hate. But her brain’s already gone ahead and assigned it to him without her permission and, really, it’s an absolutely fitting description, if she does say so herself.)

Of course, this is the moment that reality rears its ugly head and butts in on her perfectly happy morning. And naturally, it takes the form of a slime mold disguised as a blond, sleazy football player. Wait, that’s probably unfair to slime mold.

Movement out of the corner of El’s eye draws her attention away from her locker and she jumps a little at the sound of metal creaking next to her. She looks over and has to fight back the urge to cringe as she sees Zach Mercer leaning against the locker next to hers. He has his arms crossed over his chest in a way that is probably supposed to emphasize the size of his biceps, but instead makes him look like a neanderthal. And he’s smiling at her like he’s very intently picturing what she looks like naked and barely trying to mask that he’s doing so.

And, again, El wants to throw up.

_God, what a creep._

“Well, good morning,” Zach says. God, his leering has somehow transferred to his voice – El didn’t even know that was possible. “And may I just say that you are looking particularly hot today. Didn’t know you’d lean in to the bad girl look, but I like it.”

El barely suppressed the snort that bubbles up inside of her. “Not really a ‘bad girl’ look,” she says as she looks back at her locker to place her heavy US History book on one of the shelves. “But you keep on thinking that. Let me know how that works out for you.”

Once again, it seems that El’s sarcasm goes right over Zach’s head because when she looks over at him, he’s smiling in some sort of perverted victory. _Ugh, spare me._ “Oh, I will,” Zach says, one thick eyebrow arching knowingly.
El tries not to shudder, but she can’t hold back the way that her shoulders shift like she’s trying to shrug this whole thing off. “Is there something I can do for you? I’m trying to get ready for class, over here.”

“Why, as a matter of fact, there is,” Zach says. He leans towards her, like he’s going to try and kiss her neck or something, and El almost falls into her locker’s open door in her rush to get away. “It occurs to me that, you being new in town and all, that you might need someone to show you around – be your guide, if you will. And, well, that just so happens to be one of... many services I provide.”

El arches an eyebrow. Yeah, it doesn’t take a genius to figure out what other “services” Zach thinks he provides. Seriously, how does anyone with a working gag reflex function around this bozo? (don’t answer that. seriously. don’t.)

Until this point, El’s been playing above Zach’s handicap, using snarky responses as a form of rejection and dismissal, all of which have gone straight over his head. But there’s no quipping her way out of this one – she’s going to have to turn him down to his face. “Hmm...how about ‘no thanks’?” she says and punctuates this by zipping up her backpack and closing her locker.

“Aw, c’mon, don’t play this game with me, sweetheart. Not when I’m out here being so nice.” Zach gives her what El assumes he thinks is a winning smile, all wide-eyed pleading and heartthrob levels of cute.

But El can see the ugly beneath the facade, the entitlement and selfishness and boys will be boys under that smile, and she feels her blood boil in response. “Not playing a game,” she says as she shoulders her backpack once more, her voice terse as she seriously begins to lose her patience. “I’d literally rather do anything else than voluntarily spend time with you. And with that, I’m heading off to homeroom.”

El sees annoyed disbelief flash across Zach’s face – like he never even accounted for the possibility that she’d turn him down– but she’s already moving on to more pleasant things and leaving this interaction behind in the trash heap of history where it belongs.

But she only gets a handful of steps away before Zach’s voice calls after her. “Hey, where are you going? I wasn’t done!”

A sharp, almost cruel smile curls up the corners of El’s lips as she turns in her heel to look back at Zach, continuing her way down the hall as she switches to walking backwards. “Yeah, but I was.” El can feel everyone’s eyes on the scene she and Zach are making – it must look like the pretty new girl and the popular football player are acting out a dance as old as teen rom-com history, like this is a play that everyone watches, but barely anyone participates in.

But nothing could be further from the truth. Not when Zach is literally the last person she’d ever want to be with. No, this is just annoying and disgusting and El’s 100% done with everything about it.

El turns back around to walk facing forward, but Zach still isn’t finished shouting after her. “Playing hard to get, huh? I can work with that!”

El doesn’t bother responding besides the dismissive hand gesture she gives him over her shoulder as she keeps walking. And luckily, this time, Zach doesn’t say anything else and El can walk away in peace, free to finally let her thoughts move on to happier things.
Like Homeroom, where El’s honestly curious how things are going to shake out.

Yesterday, she sat next to Dustin – who she actually really likes. Even if Dustin weren’t friends with Mike (which gives El just one more way of getting close to Mike, if she wants to be mercenary about it...which she doesn’t), he seems like someone El could and would want to honestly be friends with: smart and funny and just really nice.

But Jen’s also in her Homeroom, so El’s not sure where she’s going to sit.

Maybe it’ll be like yesterday, where people sit in the same seats they picked out (since that’s definitely a thing) and El will sit next to Dustin by default.

Or maybe Jen will find a way to clear a spot for El. Though El hopes, if that’s the case, that Jen is at least nice about it. She doesn’t want to kick anyone out of their spot if they don’t want to move.

But, regardless of how it shakes out, it’s going to be interesting and El honestly can’t wait.

As he sits at the same desk he sat at yesterday in Homeroom, Dustin finds himself watching the open doorway and wishing he wasn’t.

Because he’s waiting for El to walk in through the door, hoping that she sits next to him again.

And Dustin really shouldn’t be. It’s always a bad idea to get one’s hopes up when popular girls are involved. But Dustin can’t help himself – he just wants to be friends with her. It’s not that he’s attracted to her (though El is undeniably one of the most beautiful girls he’s ever seen in his life). It’s that, for all that she’s destined to be one of Hawkins High’s most popular girls, El’s nice and funny and fun to talk to. And, if her presence in Honors Chem with the Party (and Honors US History and Trig that she shares with Mike, much to Dustin’s amusement) is anything to go by, she’s smart, too – maybe a little nerdy, even.

And wouldn’t that be something. A gorgeous, popular, nerdy girl.

May wonders never cease.

So, yeah, Dustin’s watching the open door that leads into Homeroom and crossing his fingers that he’s not getting his hopes up only to be disappointed in the next few minutes.

It’s only about another minute before all Dustin’s wondering comes to an end and, as he watches, El appears in the doorway. And, for a moment, none of Dustin’s wonderings even matter because they’ve been driven out of his head by the punk rocker standing in the entrance to the classroom.

There’s a brief second where Dustin thinks he’s hallucinating, but it only takes a couple of blinks for him to realize, no, he’s definitely not seeing things and, yes, El Hopper is most definitely standing there, looking like she’s just walked out of some punk rock magazine, or something.

The ripped tights, short plaid skirt, high ponytail, and powerful eyeliner are dead-giveaways. But the piece de resistance is the tank-top El’s wearing that has the Wonder Woman logo across the front. It looks badass, but it’s subtle – doesn’t announce that it’s a comic book reference or anything. It’s something that only people who think it’s cool or people who are in the know would actually wear, and Dustin can’t help but wonder which one El is. Does she know she has the symbol of a comic book icon emblazoned on her shirt? Or does she just think it’s neat looking?
Before Dustin can ponder which is more likely, though, El spots him and smiles. And Dustin’s whole being just lights up with pride.

Yeah, part of it is that Dustin knows Jennifer Hayes isn’t here yet – she won’t be for a couple of minutes, if yesterday’s timing is anything to go by, so she’s not an option as someone for El to go sit by. But it’s mainly just that it’s clear from the smile on El’s face that she recognizes him and that’s just about as novel as anything in the universe.

Maybe Dustin’s problem isn’t that he’s a loser, but that the popular kids around him are all jerks.

But none of that’s important right now as El takes one glance around the room, like she’s confirming her options, before she comes right towards him.

The smile on El’s face is bright and open as she swings her backpack off her shoulders. “Morning, Dustin.”

Holy shit, she remembered his name! Keep it cool, Dustin, he reminds himself a split second later. “Hi, El,” he says, trying to keep his smile a few notches below “desperate and eager”. “See you remembered how to find Homeroom.”

That earns him a playful roll of her eyes, forcing Dustin to bite back a laugh. “Yes, I have figured out how to navigate the labyrinth that is Hawkins High,” El says, all graceful movement as she sits down next to him. “Just give me a thread and call me Ariadne.”

Dustin lets out a sound that’s something akin to a breathless guffaw, shocked at the reference. Well, maybe she is a bit of a nerd after all…. “Ha, I don’t think I’ve ever heard someone use Greek mythology in a quip before.”

El lifts one shoulder in a delicate shrug. “Well, I used to read a lot of Greek mythology when I was a kid,” she says. “And the story of Theseus and the Minotaur was always a little romantic. I mean, it ended sad, but I always thought it was kinda cool how Ariadne was pretty much responsible for Theseus’ victory against the Minotaur by giving him the tools to survive. Like, she’s a hero in her own right, too, and that’s pretty neat. Plus, she was doing it for love, even though she and Theseus didn’t end up together.”

And just when Dustin didn’t think he could be more surprised…. “Wow, you really know your Greek mythology, don’t you?” he asks, a smile pulling up the corners of his lips.

El returns the expression, mouth curled in a wry grin that makes her look mischievous. “Yes, but just don’t ask me to tell you what it means, or what any of it represents. I don’t do literary interpretation. It’s really my one downfall.”

“Wow, how magnanimous of you to reveal you have any flaws,” Dustin says through a low chortle.

“I know. I’m really something, aren’t I? Just...so humble. But, honestly, it’s a burden I’m more than willing to bear,” El says, obviously biting the inside of her cheek to keep her smile under control.

But Dustin can’t control the laughter that escapes him, which seems to trigger El’s giggles and, soon, they’re both laughing, bonding over being silly and sarcastic. And the entire time, Dustin can’t help but be amazed at how easy it is to be friendly with El. Honestly, it’s like they’ve been friends for years instead of only knowing each other for 24 hours and Dustin’s not entirely sure how to feel about that.

Is it normal to feel like you’ve clicked with someone so quickly?
Regardless of how Dustin feels about the whole thing, it doesn’t stop him from spending the remaining few minutes before Homeroom starts laughing and talking with El. There’s a brief pause when El turns to say hi to Jen when she walks into the room, but Jen goes off to her seat without more than a second, if confused, glance at El, who pretty immediately turns back to him to continue their conversation. Dustin’s not sure if El notices the look Jen gives her, but he sure as hell does, and sets off the beginning of warning bells inside the back of his head.

Because, despite how much fun he’s having with El, despite how quickly they’ve hit it off as friends, a single thought is making itself apparently clear:

*Nothing is really ever going to be the same ever again.*

Homeroom goes by in the blink of an eye, it feels like to El. Once Mr. Evans finishes taking attendance and delivering the handful of announcements for the day, he pretty much lets the class do their own thing for the rest of the half-hour.

Behind her, El can hear Jen talking to one of her friends. Which means El’s free to turn to her right, where Dustin’s glancing at her out of the corner of his eye all the while trying to be inconspicuous. So, naturally, he’s being *super* obvious about it.

El bites back a smile as she turns to look at who she hopes is a new friend. “So, what do you usually do for the rest of Homeroom?”

“Oh, um, not much, usually,” Dustin says, an embarrassed cringe crossing over his face. “I don’t really have friends in Homeroom, so I pretty much do my own thing.”

El’s heart tugs in sympathy – *no friends in Homeroom? how horrible!* – and she doesn’t fight off her smile this time, feeling the warmth blossoming in her chest making its way to her face. “Well, I’ll be a friend you can talk to in Homeroom if you don’t mind the distraction,” she says as she leans forward on the desk, arms crossing in front of her as she twists to face Dustin more head on.

Surprise flashes across Dustin’s face for a split second – there and gone in a blink – and it’s quickly replaced with a broad, toothy smile that El just finds absolutely adorable. “You want to be friends with a nerd, huh?”

El rolls her eyes, letting out a not-so-delicate snort. “Please,” she says, sitting back up a little so she can gesture to the symbol on her shirt. “It’s not like I’m not nerdy, too.”

It’s to Dustin’s credit that as he glances down at where El’s gesturing, he doesn’t let his gaze linger on her chest *at all* and El finds herself relieved and touched that Dustin is such a gentleman. *Seriously, they make them different out here in Hawkins, don’t they?* “Yes, I noticed the logo. Take it you’re a fan?”

“I love Wonder Woman,” El says, her smile growing into a face-splitting grin. “She’s so bad-ass but, like, she’s also kind and smart and wise and just *amazing*. I love her. She’s my hero.”

Dustin lets out a laugh that’s just not quite a giggle. “That’s so cool that you like Wonder Woman. I don’t think I’ve ever met a girl who likes comic book characters before.”

“Well, that’s a shame,” El says. “Though I’m sure there are girls around here who like comic books, but they might not feel comfortable sharing that knowledge with others.” El knows this from
experience, having once been ashamed of her nerdy habits. But hiding those parts of herself took so much energy that it was easier to just stop after a while and own it instead of denying it. But El also knows it’s not always that easy, so she doesn’t look down at anyone who feels like they have to hide.

“Hmm, not so sure about that, sometimes,” Dustin says. “But I’m sure you’re probably right. I mean, you’re a girl, so you’d know.” He shoots her a deprecating grin and shrugs one shoulder concedingly.

“Thanks for that vote of confidence,” El says, biting the inside of her cheek to keep from grinning too widely as she teases.

Dustin must pick up on the fact that El’s teasing, because he grins back at her. “Oh, any time.” He lets out a low laugh and shakes his head, as if he can’t get over how amused he is by this entire situation. But, a moment later, Dustin leans towards El, one elbow braced on the desk as he gives her a conspiratorial smile. “So, if you like Wonder Woman, what other nerdy things do you like…?”

The rest of Homeroom passes in this way, where El reveals that she likes sci-fi novels and Broadway musicals, while Dustin tells her about his undying love for “Lord of the Rings” and all things Marvel. El gets so into the conversation that it comes as a complete surprise when the bell rings, signaling the transition between Homeroom and 2nd period.

“So, where to next for you?” El asks as she gets up from her desk, one hand reaching for her backpack.

“Honors American Lit,” Dustin says. “What about you?”

“Just regular American Lit for me,” El says, pulling a face. “Like I said, literary interpretation is not my thing. It’s literally the only non-honors class I’m taking.” She pauses, thinking. “Well, except for French, but you guys don’t seem to offer honors foreign language classes at this school.”

Dustin shrugs. “It’s a small school,” he says. “But that’s cool that you’re pretty much on the Honors track.”

El lets Dustin move so that he’s standing next to her before she starts walking so they can leave the classroom together. Once again, she can feel the eyes of several people on her, curious and judgmental, and El honestly doesn’t understand why this time. Is there something so strange with her walking next to Dustin? Well, whatever it is, El’s determined to ignore the stares and the strange looks. “Yeah, but that’s pretty much from me being incredibly stubborn,” she says as she and Dustin start heading down the hallway. “I’m not, like, super smart or anything.”

“Well, you’re smart enough to make it mostly onto Honors track,” Dustin says. “I don’t think being stubborn would be enough.”

A light blush crawls up El’s cheeks at the compliment and she nudges Dustin with her elbow. “Oh, stop,” she says, trying to deflect. “But thanks, though.”

Dustin smiles so broadly it’s almost blinding and the sight makes El so happy to see. “Anytime,” he says as they approach a juncture. “Well, I’m this way,” he says, jerking his thumb. “See you in Chemistry?”

El grins. “Oh, definitely. Bye, Dustin.” And, after an exchange of waves, El turns to head off for her English class, a smile on her face. Yeah, she’s definitely made a new friend and that’s always exciting.
But now she has to go to American Lit, which is so not exciting and El is all but counting down the minutes until this class is over.

Her teacher, Mr. Green, spends the entire 40 minutes introducing “Of Mice and Men” as their first book for the semester and El literally couldn’t care less. In her experience, books chosen for English classes are boring and while El never shirks off doing her homework, it doesn’t mean she has to actively care or express interest where none exists.

Which means El has enough free brain power to think about what’s really important: the fact that, in less than 40 very short minutes, she will be back in the same room as Mike. And her heart just about races at the mere thought.

It’s not too much of an exaggeration to say that El has been impatiently waiting until she could see him again. She only met him 24 hours ago, yet he’s crawled into her heart and mind in a way no one’s ever done before. She’s not sure exactly what this means or anything, but she does know she’s ridiculously attracted to him, both physically and intellectually, and she very desperately wants to explore what that means. At the very least, she just wants to get to know Mike better, wants to be near him to find out if what she’s feeling could turn into something amazing...or, hell, even just reciprocated.

It’s this excitement, this eagerness, that helps carry her through an onerous American Lit class and, when the bell finally rings signaling the end of class, El’s practically the first one out of her seat.

(Though not after quickly glancing down at her notebook and cringing at the serious lack of notes she managed to take during class. Ok, just because you have a crush on a guy and you’re not the biggest fan of English class doesn’t mean you can slack off during class, Hopper. Gotta keep that GPA up, remember? )

There’s an extra urgency to her steps as she makes her way to her Honors Trig class, an almost manically giddy smile on her face, and El realizes that maybe she’s a little too excited. So she forces herself to stop just outside the classroom and take a moment to calm down, to get herself together.

There is such a thing as coming on too strong, you know, El thinks as she tries to rein in her excitement. But it still doesn’t stop one hand coming up to make sure her hair is all in place, ponytail still neat with no flyaways, or both her hands from smoothing over her skirt, fingers trembling with a combination of nervousness and excitement. So she closes her eyes and takes in a deep breath in an attempt to calm the racing of her heart and tamp down the breadth of her smile. The last thing she needs is to scare or turn Mike off before she’s even had a chance to find out if he’s at all interested in her.

But there’s only so much El can do with the time she has. With one last quick, deep breath, she opens her eyes and makes the rest of her way into her math classroom. Her head is held high and her smile hopefully totally normal (and not at all lovesick or anything) as she quickly scans the room, eyes zeroing in on where she sat yesterday to see if Mike is sitting right next to there.

Lo and behold, he is. And El’s heart immediately begins racing again, completely out of her control.

But, god, she just can’t help it, and El forces herself to walk a little slower as she approaches the empty seat next to Mike, just to give herself a few extra moments to just stare at him.

He’s looking down at his desk, textbook out with a pencil loosely held in one hand while he scans the open page in front of him. He’s wearing a white, short-sleeve button down shirt with greenish-blue pin stripes that he’s paired with dark blue jeans and a pair of black Chucks. His hair is just as beautifully wild and messy as it was yesterday and the way his shirt stretches across his shoulders
threatens to make El swoons.

Mike must see the motion of her approaching him out of the corner of his eye because he looks up when El’s only a few feet away.

And, just like yesterday, it’s like time fucking stops as their eyes meet across the scant distance that separates them. But only after Mike’s eyes travel up her body, starting at her feet. His gaze isn’t lecherous or overly lingering, but El still feels the scan of his gaze like a physical caress and she has to fight to keep from shivering.

But what really gets her is the look in his eyes and El almost gasps at the depths swirling in his dark gaze – curious and hopeful, yet calculating and wary, all with a touch of surprise and what El hopes is heated attraction. It’s a richly complicated look, full of fierce intelligence, and El realizes just how refreshing this is compared to how Zach looked at her earlier.

_Literally no contest here_, El thinks as she slips her backpack from her shoulders and smiles. “Hi, Mike,” she says, tone a little too bright and eager in a way that is almost embarrassing.

None of that matters, though, when Mike smiles back, the expression more sober and tempered than hers but still thrilling, and El’s stomach swoops dangerously. It’s just not fair how the gentle curve of his lips highlights the sweep of his cheekbones and the lines of his jaw and all it does is makes El want to kiss him even more than she did not 5 seconds ago. Which is a lot, if El’s being perfectly honest (and she usually is – why waste time telling lies? Doesn’t make any sense, if you ask her).

“Hi, El,” Mike says in return. “How’s, uh, how’s your second day at Hawkins High going?”

The concern, even if just polite, is beyond touching and El finds herself giggling as she sits down at the desk next to Mike’s. “Oh, much better now,” she says with a sweet, if coy smile, very obviously flirting, and she takes victory in the way a light blush begins crawling up Mike’s cheeks. Her stomach filling with butterflies at just how pretty he is and El’s completely enchanted with the way the color splashed across his skin contrasts with the freckles across his nose and cheeks. God, she just wants to trace all those freckles with her fingertips, wants to feel the heated softness of his skin glide beneath her touch.

It’s in this moment that, despite only knowing Mike for literally a day, El realizes something very important:

This is way more than a crush.

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For just a moment, Mike can only stare back at El.

_Holy shit, is she flirting with him?_ No, she can’t be...can she? It looks like she might be, with her sparkling gaze and coy smile, cheeks lightly flushed in a way that beautifully sets off the creamy tone of her skin.

But reality, as it usually does, comes crashing back in a second later. _No, she’s not flirting with you._ _You’re you and she’s, well...._

_Amazingly gorgeous_, his thoughts finish with a dreamy sigh.

Seriously, El really is the most beautiful girl he’s ever seen in his entire life. And today she looks like
she belongs in a punk band, all thick eyeliner and ripped tights and heavy boots and a Wonder Woman themed shirt holy shit. It’s not a look he would have ever expected someone like El to wear – popular girls just don’t dress like they’re in a street gang, or anything – but she pulls it off with an ease and grace that is oh so attractive.

*Plus, that ponytail is really doing it for him.*

A blush explodes on Mike’s face – a potent combination of embarrassment and attraction stemming from the thoughts swirling in his head at exactly why that ponytail is so alluring and what he would do with it…

(whoa, ok, it’s really inappropriate to be fantasizing like this in class. especially when the object of your fantasies is sitting right next to you, wheeler.)

Mike lets out a weak cough in an attempt to cover up his awkward staring (a futile attempt, he knows) and hopes that El can’t, like, read minds or anything. “Oh, um, good – that’s good you’re settling in ok.”

El somehow smiles even wider – good, she hasn’t noticed him fantasizing about her like some sort of desperate loser – and Mike wishes he could stop the way his heartbeat stutters at the sight of El’s warm and gorgeous smile. “Your concern is much appreciated, thank you.” Her tone is bright and chipper and it warms Mike from the inside out.

Mike finds himself chuckling in response, his defenses crumbling under the force of El’s regard. He’s going to regret this, he just knows it. But, for the moment, he doesn’t care.

“Well, I always aim to please,” is what Mike says next, echoing El’s tone with a wry version of his own. The flirtatious undertone of his own words, barely disguised, catches Mike off guard, even though he knows he’s letting himself indulge in forgetting, just for a moment, that El has the power to break his heart…and probably will.

Which means it really doesn’t help when El lets out a sparkling giggle, like the high-pitched sound of wind chimes, and ducks her gaze briefly and demurely before glancing back up at him through impossibly long lashes….

God, he so very badly wants to kiss her.

“That’s good to hear,” El says, a light blush covering her cheeks. And is it his imagination or is her voice a lot… breathier than is was a few moments ago?

“Really? So easily?” Ok, he’s seriously playing with fire now.

Her gorgeous lips curl in a temptingly coy smile. “Hmm, maybe you just know what I like,” El comes back with. And, holy shit, she’s playing with fire right along him in a way not even he can miss.

Well this is interesting… and oh so dangerous.

The bell chooses this very moment to ring, interrupting the flirtatious back and forth, and El almost
wants to scream.

No, not when this is going so well!

But there’s really no choice but to button this up as Ms. Geno begins the day’s lecture. El gives Mike one last smile, a promise for later, and is beyond pleased when Mike smiles back. Yes, there’s still a little hesitancy there – and maybe a little fear, too – but El is encouraged by the sight even as she focuses her attention on listening to the day’s lecture.

She’s encouraged because Mike was flirting back. Like, fully participating in the flirty give-and-take with that super cute smile of his, eyes sparkling and making her feel all tingly with the undercurrent of excitement that runs beneath their every word.

Still, she’s going to take this slow, give both of them a chance to get to know each other. Besides, she reminds herself with a sobering dose of realism, just because Mike was flirting doesn’t mean he’s necessarily interested in anything more. Sometimes flirting is just flirting.

But it’s a start.

Feeling beyond buoyant, El all but floats through Honors Trig. The entire time, she can feel Mike’s presence next to her, as hyper-aware of him as she is, and she can’t resist stealing glances at him out of the corner of her eye.

And her heart does dizzying flips in her chest when, after Ms. Geno breaks to let them work through practice problems, she looks over to see Mike looking back at her. There’s a light blush that crawls up his face when he notices her staring back, one that she mirrors. He smiles at her first, this time, a shy, bashful expression that only highlights the beautiful curve of his lips and El so badly wants to feel those lips against her own.

God, it’s unfair just how cute Mike is, almost irresistibly so. Like, how’s she supposed to be able to focus when there exists a guy that is exactly her type? El’s always gone for the tall and lanky, “hipster-esque” type and Mike fits exactly in that description, especially with that hair and those cheekbones….

El has to shake her head a bit to clear her thoughts so she can focus on her practice math problems and not on what it would feel like to run her fingers through Mike’s hair (it just looks so soft and she practically can’t help herself). But it’s tough, especially when the object of her affection is sitting not two feet away, face adorably scrunched up in concentration as he works through his own problems.

Around the room, there’s a handful of low murmurs of talking and Ms. Geno isn’t doing anything to stop it, so El figures it’s not forbidden to talk. “Everything ok, over there?” she asks, glancing down quickly at her paper to continue working on the problem she’s in the middle of, one eye trained on Mike.

Mike startles a bit, expression morphing into one of surprise, like he’s been caught, but he smiles bashfully a moment later, once the initial moment’s faded. “Yeah, still working through a bit how sine and cosine work. How about you?”

El smiles back. “Same. What number are you on?”

“6. How about you?”

“Just a bit ahead of you. I’m on 8,” El says.

A bright look of hope flashes in Mike’s eyes. “Oh, would you mind showing me how you got
through number 5? I think I got it, but I’m not sure….”

“Sure!” El chirps, making sure to keep her voice low. “And, yeah, that one was tricky. Here, here’s what I got….” She takes her paper and angles it so she and Mike can both lean over it in the space between their desks.

She watches, almost breathlessly so, as Mike scans over her paper, working his way through the logic she’s written down. His face is a beautiful study in concentration, furrowed eyebrows and lower lip pulled between his teeth. El imagines herself reaching for him with one hand, fingers delicately cupping his chin to turn his face towards her, before leaning over, head tilting just so so she can press her mouth to his, draw that lower lip from between his teeth and –

“Yeah, that’s what I got, too!” Mike says in quiet exclamation, startling El from her fantasy with a suddenness that has her almost choking on a gasp while her face heats up in a fierce blush. Mike looks up a second later and the look on his face changes from one of triumph to one of confused concern. “Oh, hey, you ok?” he asks, brow furrowing once more, eyebrows meeting above the bridge of his nose.

El gives herself a quick shake to clear the embarrassment and the images of kissing Mike her brain’s taunting her with. “Yeah, yeah, I’m fine, just – fine.”

Mike smiles, but it’s tinged with a little uncertainty now. “Oh, um, ok.” He ducks his gaze, smile turning sheepish again. “Uh, thanks for letting me look at your answer.”

“Feel better now?” El asks as she pulls her paper back to her desk. A small smile creeps up onto her lips, hopefully looking relaxed enough to offset the still-fierce-ish blush on her face.

“Yeah, thanks,” Mike says with a nod. He drops his gaze briefly, chewing on his lower lip again, but this time out of what El figures is nervousness. “You’re, uh, pretty good at math,” he says when he looks back at her, a light blush creeping its way onto his cheeks.

The compliment goes straight to El’s heart and sets off a flurry of butterflies in her chest that leaves her all tingly. “It’s my favorite subject,” she says a little weakly.

“It shows,” Mike says. He lets out a small laugh, shaking his head a little, and gestures back down to his paper. “Well, I should get back to my own work. Gotta keep up with you, after all.” The corners of his lips curl up with a barely perceptible grin, eyebrow quirking with a brief twitch, and El thinks Mike can’t possibly be any cuter than this.

They both go back to their work after that, and El swears her heart’s going to explode from all the feelings coursing through her. It’s almost overwhelming – the sweetness of Mike’s compliment, the feel of him so close to her (and yet, so far), the way he smiles at her, the sweet way he responds to her flirting, how badly she just wants to know everything about him.

It gets to the point where El’s almost relieved when the bell finally rings. Her head’s spinning with all things Mike and she needs a little space to breathe, to think like a regular person and not a lovesick girl with a crush that is so much more than a crush.

But, of course, she and Mike are still next to each other in their Honors Trig class and El can’t help but look over at him as she gathers her things. “What’s your next class?” El asks as she stands and grabs her backpack.

Mike looks over at her, a little startled (why is he always startled when she tries to get his attention?), but he gives her a small smile and a shrug a moment later. “Spanish. And you have French, right?”
“Yep!” El nods as she slips her backpack up onto her shoulders, watching as Mike does the same. She waits for him to start walking so she can fall in step by his side. “Well, I guess I’ll see you in the torture otherwise known as US History.”

Mike lets out a laugh, the sound both dry and resigned. “Wow, that’s one way to put it,” he says, shaking his head, but still looking slightly impressed at her turn of phrase in a way that has El smiling.

“Hmm, my dad always says I have a way of saying things,” El says. “I think that’s his way of telling me I’m blunt.”

“An underrated trait, I assure you,” Mike says, still laughing a little.

El giggles at the subtle compliment and stops just in the hallway, forcing people to go around her. “Well, I need to be heading off to French. So I’ll see you in a couple of hours.”

Mike holds up a hand in a small wave. “See you, El.”

El waves back and, with one last look at Mike, spins on her heel and walks off in the direction of her French class, all smiles from her interaction with the sweetest boy on the face of the planet.

And as she makes her way down hallway to her French class, high on all things Mike Wheeler, she has no idea of the existence the pair of eyes following her….

A pair of eyes belonging to one Max Mayfield.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaaand here comes Max! I'm looking forward to writing the next chapter. Max is going to play a crucial role here and I'm excited to write it for y'all.

And could El be more head over heels and unashamed of it? She's great to write, I love her so much (probably explains why this chapter is mostly from her POV).

Anyway, let me know what you thought and I hope to have the next chapter out in the next few weeks! Catch y'all on the flip side!

(and, if anyone wants to come bug me and flail about mileven with me, hit me up on tumblr where i'm also fatechica. i'd love to talk to you all! especially to help me weather the rest of this hellacious hiatus!)
Well, hello, there everyone! I feel like I always say this these days, but I didn't mean for this to take so long in coming out. But, as always seems to be the case these days, shit is crazy busy in my life atm and I haven't have as much time to write lately as I would like.

Still, doesn't stop me from writing 13k word chapters, though, when I do have the time, though, so...I guess that's never changing.

(not that any of you ever complain, but still)

Anyway, I hope you enjoy this! There's not a lot of Mileven, but get ready for a lot of Max in this chapter. Or, how I've been referring to her as, Mileven's Reluctant Fairy Godmother (this will all make sense one day, I promise).

A QUICK WARNING FIRST:
There's some language in this chapter that is crude and almost explicitly sexual in nature. In this case, it's literal locker room talk and 17-18 year old boys being 17-18 year old boys. It's supposed to be gross and disgusting, but I can understand how some people don't like reading this kind of language. If you don't want to read it, please skip the only scene from Mike's POV this chapter. It's not crucial to the plot and I don't want to make any of you read anything you don't want to.

Other than that, enjoy!

El Hopper walks through the halls of Hawkins High with her head held high and shoulders straight despite the weight of her backpack. She walks with a confidence that is just shy of bravado, steps sure and proud, like she knows who she is and isn't afraid to show it….

Like she’s completely and blissfully ignorant of the ripples she’s leaving her wake, the foundations of high school life she’s threatening to crumble with her sheer presence.

 Fucking popular girls. They never care, do they? Just as long as they get what they want.

Max is standing at her locker between third and fourth periods, gathering something quickly that she needs for her Spanish class, when she sees El out of the corner of her eye and Max can’t stop herself from turning just slightly to watch Hawkins High’s newest student.

El Hopper is one of those girls who is impossible to ignore: beautiful and confident, almost brashly so, wrapped in an aura of sweet entitlement, like she knows all she has to do is smile just so and people will fall to their knees to do whatever she wants.

It’s so typical popular-girl that Max almost wants to vomit.

The day before, hearing the rumors beginning to fly around school about the beautiful new girl from New York City, Max had been utterly not surprised to see El situated in the middle of the school’s
most popular crowd during lunch, dressed like all the other girls in clothes that were stylish and preppy and completely void of any independent thought. From where Max had been sitting with her Softball team friends, El had fit right in with the most insipid of the girls in this godforsaken school, giggling and smiling and probably talking about, like, boys and shopping and shit like that.

Yes, another popular girl, joining the pack with the rest of the moronic ninnies, Max had thought at the time. It was a thought that was only reinforced when she saw the new girl hanging out with Jennifer Hayes (who Max was convinced had cotton fluff where her brain should be) in the locker room before PE.

Yes, El Hopper really was just another popular girl, no matter what Lucas told her later that night about El being in a bunch of Honors classes.

But that was yesterday. Today, El is dressed like someone that Max would normally want to be friends with, someone interesting and not afraid to go against the grain.

And it’s causing quite the stir from the way everyone else is staring at her, too. Max has to give the new girl this: El doesn’t seem to be at all bothered by the strange looks she’s getting.

So, given all that, Max now isn’t sure what to make of the new girl who’s taken Hawkins High by storm.

She knows from Lucas that Mike seems to be developing something of a crush on El and Max almost rolls her eyes at the thought. Such a typical boy; taken in by a pretty face attached to a hot body. But, more confusing is how Lucas told her that El seemed to be returning some of the budding affection, smiling at Mike from across the cafeteria and walking with him to Chemistry looking all chummy.

And that’s got Max all sorts of confused. What game is El playing, anyway? Max knows how popular girls are and if this one does anything to hurt her friends….

Max reins in her temper, trying to calm the way her blood begins to boil in her veins. So far, El hasn’t actually done anything other than be the new girl. Could be Max is overreacting.

But there’s also a chance that she’s not. So Max will watch the new girl. Just in case.

The scene that greets El when she arrives at her French class is a little confusing, to say the least. Gone are the desks organized into neat, tidy rows. Instead, all the desks have been arranged in one, giant circle.

Oookay?

El pauses in the open doorway, thumbs hooked in the straps of her backpack, as she looks around the room, scouting out where she’s going to sit.

On the far side of the room, by the open window, are Stacey and Jen, flanked on either side by a couple of girls El met yesterday. And, on either side of them are two empty seats.

It’s Stacey who spots El first and she waves at El with a bright smile on her face. “Well, good
morning and welcome to day 2 of hell,” Stacey says as El walks over.

El shakes her head but she’s giggling a little regardless, amused at the upbeat fatalism in Stacey’s voice. “Morning guys,” she says, stopping in front of Stacey and Jennifer. “What’s with the desks?”

Jennifer shrugs. “Madame Owens just likes having the desks in a circle.”

“Says it helps ‘promote open communication’ or some stupid shit like that,” Stacey says. “Don’t know why it matters. It’s not like any of us are good at this dumb language, anyway.”

“It’s not a dumb language,” El says, gently chiding. “It’s the language of romance.”

“Whatever,” Stacey says with a roll of her eyes. But the corners of her lips are still upturned, so she’s not offended by El’s rebuke. “Anyway, we saved you a seat either next to Ashley or Maria. Take your pick.” Stacey pauses, giving El a quick look up and down. “Oh, and nice outfit. Love the punk look.” There’s a carefully crafted polite tone to Stacey’s compliment and El can see behind the facade.

El resists the urge to let out a snort. How magnanimous, she thinks, just barely keeping back wry smile that threatens to curl up her lips. El knows it’s not necessarily mean spirited, but there’s something frustrating about the way people like Stacey establish and reinforce the high school pecking order. Like El should be lucky that Stacey deigned to remember to save her a seat or complimented her outfit. Oh, high school. Will you never change?

So El just smiles her thanks and looks back and forth between the two proffered seats to see which one she wants to sit in.

El ends up choosing the one on the left next to Ashley for the sole reason that the other girl who’ll be El’s other seat neighbor has one of the coolest skirts El’s ever seen. It’s this ankle-length, patchwork denim skirt with all sorts of colors and shapes. It’s very hippie and bohemian and El absolutely loves everything about it. It looks like something she would totally have in her own closet.

El slides into her seat and, after checking that Ashley is sufficiently occupied with talking to Stacey and the others, turns to say hi to the girl with the cool skirt. “Hi, I’m El,” she says after catching the girl’s eye. “Guess we’re seat neighbors for today’s class, huh?”

There’s a pause while the other girl just stares at her, dark green eyes blinking a couple of times in confusion. “Oh, um, hi,” she says, lifting a trembling hand to tuck strands of her short brown hair behind her ear while a fierce blush creeps up under the canvas of freckles spread across almost the entire surface of her face. “I’m-

But before the girl can introduce herself, the bell rings, signaling the start of class. Madame Owens steps away from behind her desk with a perky “bonjour!” in greeting and El gives the girl next to her a small smile before shifting to focus on her teacher.

El’s opportunity to actually talk to her seat neighbor with the awesome skirt doesn’t come until about 20 minutes into class when Madame Owens has them split off into pairs to practice what they’ve just been learning. And with Ashley partnering with Stacey, El doesn’t even have to pretend to feel bad as she turns to her right.

“Hi again!” El knows there’s a bright, cheery smile on her face and she hopes it’s not too off-putting. Especially given the wary expression on the other girl’s face. “We never got to finish introductions. I’m El, if you don’t remember.”

The other girl’s eyes go a little wide, like the beginnings of panic. “Oh, uh, I remember.” A flash of
wry humor crosses her face and El finds herself encouraged by the sight. “I don’t think there’s a person at this school who doesn’t know who you are.”

“Oh,” El says with a stuttering breath. Sheesh, she didn’t know being the new kid could be so discomforting. “Well, I was warned about that, I guess,” she says a beat later, trying to ignore the heated blush that spreads over her cheeks.

The other girl laughs. “Well, that’s Hawkins for you,” she says with a shy smile. “I’m Lily, by the way.”

Grinning, El holds out her hand. “Well, it’s nice to meet you, Lily.”

Lily glances down at El’s hand, looking for a second like El’s hand might turn into a snake and bite her at any moment, but she extends her hand and the two exchange a brief handshake. “It’s, um, nice to meet you, too,” Lily says. She pauses, glancing over at Madane Owens, who’s watching the class to make sure they’re all working and not slacking off. “We should, uh, probably get to work, yeah?” Lily punctuates her point by turning towards El with her open French textbook between them.

“Oh, uh, yeah, you’re right,” El says, despite how much she desperately wants to ask Lily where she got that skirt. But that can wait until later, when they don’t have to be doing class work.

They run through their practice exercises and, when Madame Owens calls to the class to come back together, El gives Lily a bright smile and hopes that she gets the chance to ask about Lily’s skirt once class is over.

But, when the bell rings, El gets distracted with talking with Ashley and Stacey, who make her laugh once they start snarking back and forth about what horribleness awaits for them in the form of whatever the cafeteria is serving for lunch that day. And when El does remember that she had something she wanted to ask Lily, by the time she turns, Lily is gone.

“Oh, bummer,” El sighs, looking around the classroom for any sign of the other girl as she adjusts her backpack strap.

“What’s a bummer?” Stacey asks. “C’mon, let’s get a move on. I don’t want some losers grabbing our table.”

“Oh, I just wanted to ask Lily something,” El says with a shrug as she turns back to Stacey and the others….

Only to find them giggling, eyebrows arched mockingly and sharp grins on their faces. “What?” El asks, confused.

“Oh, El, don’t bother yourself with that girl,” Stacey says, shaking her head sadly. There’s a patronizing tone in Stacey’s voice that rubs El completely the wrong way and has her all but gritting her teeth.

“Yeah, she’s, like, in Drama Club,” Maria chimes in with a breezy flip of her golden hair. El’s eyebrows furrow above the bridge of her nose and she can feel herself frowning. “What’s that supposed to mean?” El asks, confused.

“Oh, El, don’t bother yourself with that girl,” Stacey says, shaking her head sadly. There’s a patronizing tone in Stacey’s voice that rubs El completely the wrong way and has her all but gritting her teeth.

“Yeah, she’s, like, in Drama Club,” Maria chimes in with a breezy flip of her golden hair. El’s eyebrows furrow above the bridge of her nose and she can feel herself frowning. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

The other girls all exchange knowing looks, even Jennifer, who looks at El with what El can only describe as sad confusion. “Well, it’s just that… I mean, everyone knows the Theater kids are total freaks. Like, no one would voluntarily hang out with them. It’d be the biggest faux pas ever, you know?”
No, El does not know. And she so doesn’t fucking agree. Anger, fierce and righteous, begins to brew in her chest, and she finds herself fighting to keep from sneering at the sheer level of blind judgment coming from the girls in front of her. Jesus Christ, what is this, the real life version of fucking Mean Girls? Seriously, El could never wholesale write off an entire group of people based on their interests. Like, that’s so fucking hypocritical, El literally almost can’t even handle it.

But, not wanting to make a scene where there’s a teacher nearby, El swallows it down. “I see,” she says, voice tight. She knows she sounds contrite, but it’s really all she can do to keep from storming off right then and there.

“Seriously, you should be lucky you have us to show you the ins and outs of this place,” Stacey says. “I know it’s not as glamorous as New York, but Hawkins High is its own kind of jungle and, really, we’re your best guide for how to survive.” Stacey smiles, clearly pleased at how “helpful” she is, before she starts walking. “Now, let’s go. There’ll be hell to pay if there’s anyone sitting at our table.”

“Hey, um, I’ll meet you there,” El says hurriedly as she walks with Stacey and the others out into the hallway. “I wanna switch some things around in my backpack for my afternoon classes.” Also, she really needs to get some distance between her and the others for a bit. Otherwise, she’s liable to explode at any moment, she’s so fucking annoyed.

Stacey scowls a bit, but shrugs it off a second later. “Alright, but don’t take too long. Otherwise, you’ll lose your seat.”

“Well, that would just be sad,” El says with a hint of sarcasm that seems to go right over everyone’s head for how little they react to it.

“The saddest,” Stacey says with an almost solemn nod. “See you in a bit.”

Jennifer’s the only one who gives El a wave goodbye and El waves back before she heads to her locker. The journey there isn’t long, but it’s enough for some of El’s anger to fizzle into disappointment.

Ok, so she’s not surprised that Stacey is a horribly judgmental bitch. And she knows that all high schools have a pecking order.

But she’s honestly disappointed in Jennifer, who sincerely comes across as a sweet and eager girl. So for her to leap right in with agreeing with Stacey and making horrible judgments about people she honestly doesn’t know… well, that’s just sad.

Besides, El really doesn’t understand why Drama Club is so bad. Back at her old school, so many of the cool kids did Drama. Especially the musicals. Yeah, sure, kids in Drama Club hadn’t been as cool as some of the athletes or anything, but they’d been nowhere near the bottom.

But here in Hawkins, it’s like it’s better to be, like, a criminal than it is to be in Drama Club.

God, teenagers make no fucking sense, El thinks with a sigh as she switches out her morning textbooks for her afternoon ones, taking her time to give her a little more space to cool down. She cringes especially at the heaviness of her US History text as it settles in her backpack, but knows she doesn’t want to rush to grab her things from her locker right before class when everyone else will be doing the same, so she’ll put up with the weight as she treks from here to the cafeteria and then to class after.

El continues to dawdle a little as she makes her way to the cafeteria, knowing she trying to avoid
lash out at her potential new friends. Because the thing of it is, is that El honestly sees potential in Stacey and the others. Jennifer is sweet, Ashley has a sly sense of humor, Maria is refreshingly blunt, and Stacey is snarky and sarcastic in ways El usually loves.

But they’re all so far up on their high horses, assured of their place in the universe, comfortable as they look down at everyone else, and that just pisses El off so fucking much. It bothers her even more, in its own way, that they look at her and see someone who belongs with *them*, like she’s worthy of being in with the “in group” because she’s pretty and new and from a big city.

El still hasn’t fully calmed down by the time she’s worked her way through the cafeteria (the food on the tray in her hands somehow looks worse than yesterday and El’s *seriously* going to start bringing her own lunch from now on because *ew*) and she pauses as she looks out at the sea of tables.

Right there, in the middle like they’re holding court, are Stacey and the others, bright and laughing and giggling, people swarming around them like they’re moths to a flame, like Icarus trying to fly high and hoping not to get burned in the process.

And El very much doesn’t want to go sit with them. Not when she’s still annoyed and borderline pissed off.

*Ok, then, where are you going to sit?* she asks herself and lets her gaze scan the room.

It doesn’t take El long to spot Lily sitting with her friends at a table along the wall… or, rather, it doesn’t take El long to spot Lily’s *skirt*, its patchwork colors standing out easily in the crowd of more staid outfits. El smiles and, without a second glance over at Stacey’s table, practically beelines it for where Lily’s sitting with her friends.

There’s a few empty seats at the table and, luckily, one of them’s next to Lily. El doesn’t even hesitate as she approaches the table and clears her throat. “Um, hi, is this seat taken?”

No one seems to have seen El coming, because her question take the entire table by surprise. They all turn to look at her, shocked expressions appearing on startled faces, some of them even going a little pale.

“El? What are you doing?” It’s Lily who manages to speak up first, the question sounding annoyingly strangled.

“Hoping to join you guys for lunch,” El says. “Is that ok?”

One of the other girls at the table stutters out an answer. “I mean, you can, but—”

“Great!” El says as she plucks her tray down in front of the empty seat next to Lily before sliding into the chair. “So, honestly, I meant to ask after class, but you disappeared before I could. Where *did* you get that skirt, Lily? You have to tell me so I can go see what other cool stuff I can find there.”

But there’s no answer, just a bunch of blank stares all pointed in her direction. El looks around the table, meeting every confused gaze as best she can. “What? Do I have something on my face or something?”

“We’re in Drama Club,” one of the other kids says, a guy who’s probably a year or so younger than El, face scarred with moderate acne and dark hair that hangs around his ears.

El screws up her face in a moue of annoyance. “Ok, that’s the second time I’ve heard that phrase like it’s just supposed to explain everything and I just don’t understand it.”
“Sitting with us is the equivalent of social suicide,” Lily says, glancing away with an ashamed blush on her face.

El harrumphs. “Well, I don’t buy that at all. At my old school, I had tons of friends in Drama Club and I always participated in the spring musical. So this whole thing makes no sense and I’m not going to let dumb, nonsense rules dictate who I get to be friends with,” she says, crossing her arms over her chest.

“You… want to be friends with us?” another of the girls asks, tripping over her words a little in a combination of what El has to guess is nervousness and surprise.

El smiles, a small giggle escaping her. “I generally want to be friends with everyone.” She pauses, thinking. “Unless, you’re, like, axe murderers or hate, like, puppies and kitties and stuff. Then that’s a different conversation.”

El watches as Lily glances around the rest of the table, everyone trading looks like they’re having some sort of silent debate. After a second, Lily turns to her and gives her a small smile. “Well, if you’re ok with ruining your social standing here….”

“Psh, that’s overrated,” El says with a wave of her hand. “Besides, you can make it up to me by telling me where you got that skirt. I’m seriously dying to know….”

Ok, now Max is seriously confused.

She’s sitting with Lucas and the rest of the Party at one of the outlying tables in the cafeteria, having decided to join them today rather than some of her other friends like she did the day before. They’ve crammed the 5 of them around a table meant for 4 people, Max having dragged over a chair so she can squish up next to Lucas on one side, their thighs pressed together while they hold hands under the table. Every so often, he squeezes her hand or she runs her thumb over the length of his index finger and it’s quiet and soothing and subtle in the ways that are the hallmarks of their public physical affection.

Around her, the boys are talking about… something nerdy, Max is sure – geeking out over some upcoming video game release, probably, if she had to guess. But Max’s attention is focused on the other side of the cafeteria, where probably the strangest thing she’s ever seen is taking place.

Popular new girl El Hopper. Is sitting with the theater kids. And she’s having a great time.

Max isn’t the only one who’s noticed this, either. It feels like at least half the cafeteria has also noticed and the whispers and stares ripple their way through the crowd.

Max spares a glance over at the center of the cafeteria, where Stacey and her crowd have most definitely noticed that El is not sitting with them. Stacey looks like she just ate a lemon, but what surprises Max is the sad, withdrawn look on Jennifer’s face, like she feels bad about something.

And, all throughout this, El’s sitting there like it’s most natural thing in the world, laughing and talking. The other kids at the table are also having a good time, it seems, even if they look surprised and a little nervous to have someone so naturally popular sitting at their table. And El doesn’t seem to notice at all that she’s casually upending the very firmly established social order.

Max isn’t sure if El is truly oblivious to all of this or that she notices and just doesn’t care. And,
surprisingly, Max is leaning towards the conclusion that El notices and doesn’t care one little bit. Because the things that Max has heard about with El point towards her being at least somewhat intelligent.

And this is why Max is confused. All of this has thrown Max a curveball for what she thought she knew and she’s honestly intrigued. Well, well, well, maybe the new girl isn’t as ditzy as I thought, Max thinks as she breathes out a small laugh, shaking her head a bit at the sight of a beautiful, popular girl sitting with the lowest of the low at Hawkins High.

All throughout this, the rest of the Party hasn’t noticed a damn thing, but Max shaking her head gets Lucas’ attention and he turns to look at her, squeezing her hand to get her to look back at him. “Hey, everything ok?” he asks, voice low while the Dustin, Mike, and Will keep talking.

For a moment, Max just looks at Lucas’ handsome face and feels that amazing fluttering in her heart that so often happens whenever she looks at him or just thinks about him. And she realizes, once again, how lucky she is to have someone in her life who just gets her like Lucas does. “Yeah, I’m ok,” she says, just as soft. She leans over and presses a light kiss against his lips. “Thanks, though.”

“Ugh, please, some of us are trying to eat, here!” Dustin says through exaggerated gagging.

Max can feel the rest of the Party’s eyes on her and Lucas and, feeling suddenly mischievous, she leans over to give Lucas a proper kiss. He chuckles against her lips, but kisses her back just as firmly, relishing just like she does in the way the rest of the Party reacts.

Dustin continues to make gagging noises, Will just sighs in resignation, and Mike makes a strangled sound in the back of his throat. “Seriously, you guys, take your disgusting PDA somewhere else,” Mike says as Max and Lucas’ kiss draws to a close.

Max turns her head to look at Mike, a smug look on her face. “Don’t get your panties in a twist because you don’t have a girlfriend of your own to kiss in front of everyone, Wheeler,” she says, sticking her tongue out at him.

Mike pulls a face. “Ugh, Mayfield, put that back in your mouth. I literally know where it just was and that’s fucking gross.”

This sets Lucas and Max off into peals of laughter that even Will joins in on, even if Mike and Dustin are still looking like they’ve swallowed a bug. And, for the moment, Max lets herself forget all about the strangeness that is El Hopper and lets herself just be, surrounded by her boyfriend and these friends who are almost like brothers to her at this point.

The rest of lunch goes by smoothly and Max doesn’t even so much remember that El even exists until PE later that afternoon.

She’s sitting on the bleachers in the gym, waiting for Mr. Palmino to show up, when she notices Jennifer Hayes coming out of the locker room. And, unlike yesterday, El Hopper isn’t by her side. Guess the fallout’s semi-serious. Max has been able to put together that Jennifer feels slighted by El. She’s not sure if it’s because of something El did or something Jennifer did that caused the sad look on Jennifer’s face during lunch, but it is curious.

As Max watches, Jennifer goes over to some of her lackeys, falling in with them easily. Well, if she’s still affected by whatever happened with El, Jennifer sure isn’t showing it anymore.

“Hey, whatcha staring at?”
Max jumps at the feel of the bleachers shaking beneath her and she rushes to look over where Dustin’s plopped himself down next to her, dressed almost identically as her in Hawkins High’s gym clothes. “Dude, a little warning next time?” she says, glaring.

But either Dustin’s long immune to her glare or her heart’s not all the way in it, because Dustin grins at her with that bright, infectious smile of his. “Whoops! Sorry about that.” he says, honestly contrite.

Max wants to roll her eyes, but Dustin’s too adorable and she loves that smile so much, that it’s hard to stay annoyed at him for very long.

(Though it’s definitely possible, if some of the spats they got into in middle school and early high school are any indication.)

“It’s ok,” Max ends up saying. “You just startled me a bit.”

Dustin chuckles. “Wouldn’t have if you hadn’t been staring off into space. So what gives, Max?”

“Oh, nothing,” Max says as she spares a glance over at where Jennifer appears to be holding court with her lesser subjects. “Just...stupid stuff.”

Dustin gives her a look that is pure skepticism. “Right,” he says, drawing out the word. “‘Stupid stuff’. Sure, I believe that.”

Max turns to give Dustin her full attention, a teasing smirk playing at the corners of her lips. “What, don’t believe me?”

“Not for a second,” Dustin says after a snort of disbelief. “This from the girl who ranted at us for a half an hour about the socioeconomic perils of...where was it again? Central America?”

A surge of righteous rage wells up in Max’s chest. “Look, I still say it’s grossly unfair how the United States-”

“Whoa, whoa, ok,” Dustin says, holding up a placating hand, cutting her off before she can get going. “See? You don’t dwell on ‘stupid stuff’. So, what’s really going on?”

Max shakes her head. “Nothing I want to talk about right this second, Dusty,” she says, using her nickname for him.

“Fine, I’ll get it out of you eventually,” Dustin says with a flat look, eyebrows arched in stubborn resolve. “Just you wait, Maxine, I’ll – ooh, look, it’s El! Hi El!” Dustin waves, his bright smile fixed back on his face, looking somewhere behind Max.

Max turns to see El looking around, still standing near the entrance to the locker room in her gym clothes, a confused look on her face as she tries to find the source of who’s calling out her name across the gymnasium. It’s clear when she spots him because a smile that rivals Dustin’s with how peppy it is stretches across her lips and she waves back, heading over to where Max and Dustin are sitting without even so much as a glance at where Jennifer Hayes is.

For just a second, Max is surprised that El is even socializing with Dustin at all, but she quickly remembers that Dustin and El are in the same homeroom and that Dustin mentioned that he and El have had friendly chats in homeroom each time so far. So maybe it shouldn’t feel surprising.

But then Max remembers how she kinda met El the day before and she squirms a little with the discomfort of being forced to consider that maybe she was wrong about the mean-spirited quip she lobbed at El the day before. *Didn’t know I was interrupting the Ditz Convention*, echoes in Max’s
mind as El notices her sitting next to Dustin. And, immediately, a hard look crosses over El’s gaze. But, to her credit, she doesn’t stop walking and approaches Max and Dustin with a confident ease that Max almost envies. “Hey Dustin!” she says, letting her voice trail off into a happy giggle. “Long time, no see.”

At that, Dustin laughs. “Yes, the 10 minutes since we last saw each other in Honors Chem has been an eternity.” He pauses, blinking in realization, and turns just a little so he can gesture to Max. “Oh, hey, I don’t know if you’ve had a chance to meet Max yet, El.”

El’s gaze swings over to Max, giving nothing away other than curiosity, and Max can’t stop the light blush of embarrassment that crosses her face. Why is it that this girl’s impassive expression is making her feel so guilty?

Because she didn’t deserve your judgment, you moron, her logical side throws at her and Max knows she’s going to have to swallow her pride a bit. Plus, she’s really and honestly curious about just who El Hopper is, this girl who could rival Stacey in how popular she is, yet seems happy being friends with goddamn near everyone in this judgmental hellhole.

So, Max throws El a small smile — mea culpa — and extends her hand. “We kinda met,” she says after clearing her throat. “Sorry about yesterday.”

For a moment, El doesn’t so much as move except to glance down at Max’s hand. But then, her smile reappears – a wry twisting of her lips – and she shakes the proffered hand. “Eh, don’t worry about it. I’ve been called worse. Nice to meet you, Max.”

El’s grip is firm, which catches Max a little off-guard, but she returns the handshake in the manner it was received. “Well, that makes me feel a little better,” Max says.

“Wait, what happened?” Dustin asks, confused.

“Max called me and Jennifer ditzes when she saw us in the locker room yesterday,” El says, shrugging it off. “Like I said, I’ve been called worse.”


Max holds out her hands in defensive apology. “What? You know how I feel about Jennifer Hayes. And when I saw the new girl with Jennifer, I just—”

“Assumed?” El asks, one eyebrow arched.

“Um, yeah,” Max says. “And I said I was sorry, ok Dustin? Besides, it’s not like El would have, like, kicked my ass or anything.”

“But I could have,” El says with a sweet giggle that completely belies the understatement she’s just uttered.

“Excuse me, what now?” Dustin asks.

El shrugs, but she’s smiling regardless. “My dad’s a cop, remember? And I grew up in New York City. Pretty much required to take self-defense classes. Plus, I used to spend a lot of time hanging out at the precinct my dad was assigned to and his former partner showed me some pretty cool tricks.”


Max rolls her eyes and smacks Dustin on the arm. “Oh my god, you’re such a dork.”
But El just laughs. “Dustin, you’re sweet.” She pauses, cocking her head to the side for a beat while one of her eyebrows quirks with humor. “Strange, but sweet.”

“That just about sums him up,” Max says with a laugh. Yeah, ok, she seriously misjudged the new girl and, for once, Max is happy to own up to the fact that she was wrong, even if she’s still really confused.

Dustin’s expression contorts as he prepares to defend himself, but before he can, Mr. Palmino walks into the gym from outside and blows the whistle around his neck, signaling the true start of PE and whatever Dustin was going to say gets lost as all the students scramble to pay attention.

PE that day ends up being 4-Square, 3 rotating games set up outside. Kids wait their turn under the watchful eye of Mr. Palmino and in between games, they talk amongst themselves.

About halfway through class, Max ends up out of her second game and goes to wait in line once more just as El is doing the same. El gives her a small smile as they stand next to each other. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Max returns, chewing on her lip again. She thinks for a moment before she lets go of the words that have built up on her tongue. “I really am sorry, by the way. For yesterday.”

“It’s ok, really,” El says with a shake of her head. “It’s in the past. In fact, consider it forgotten.”

Max lets out a laugh. “You’re really a ‘live in the moment’ kind of person, aren’t you?”

El shrugs. “Pretty much,” she says. “Always kind of been that way. I mean, what good is it to dwell on the past? It’s not like you can change it, or anything.”

Max returns El’s shrug. “Yeah, but you don’t want to forget the past, either. Otherwise, how do you know what not to do?”

“That’s fair,” El says. “But there’s danger in letting the past define you if you hold on too tightly. History’s full of people who can’t let things go and it leads to their downfall.”

For a second, Max just looks at El, unsure of what to make of this moment – that she’s have a philosophical conversation with a popular girl, of all people – before she laughs, shaking her head with incredulity. “You are not what I expected, El Hopper. Not at all.” She pauses, looking at El with a grin tugging up her lips. “Can you really beat people up?”

“If I have to,” El says, chuckling. “I prefer not to, honestly. But if the situation calls for it, I’ll throw down.” Even though she’s changed for gym class, she’s still got the thick eyeliner on and, with the mercenary grin that spreads across her face, El Hopper looks like a badass.

“Oh, I’d pay to see that,” Max says. “You’re, like, tiny.”

“Oh, ha, ha,” El says, sticking out her tongue.

Unfortunately, there’s no more to El’s response, if there was any to begin with, because they get to the front of the line and back out in their own separate games. In fact, Max doesn’t have a chance to talk to El for the rest of class. Which, on one hand, kind of sucks because there aren’t many people Max feels like she can have a truly intelligent conversation with. But, on the other hand, it gives her the space to reconcile what she assumed about El Hopper with what she now knows.

And, all in all, Max is still confused, though more pleasantly so now than she was earlier. El is smart and seems to be honestly nice, from what Max can tell (and she’s usually able to get a pretty good read on people). But she’s also a wrecking ball who seems to like blissfully charging ahead.
regardless of the consequences, unaware that people probably give her whatever she wants because she’s pretty and popular and nice. Or maybe she is aware of it and sometimes uses it to her advantage, Max isn’t sure.

But she is sure of one thing, she realizes as PE ends.

El Hopper is definitely one to keep an eye on.

El ends up playing against Dustin in her last game before the bell rings and, when class is over, she turns to him with a smile. “Hey, good game.”

Dustin lets out a wry snort and shakes his head as the two of them start heading for the locker rooms. “Oh, please, I’m sure I looked like a fish out of water – all flopping around and useless.”

El shrugs. Yeah, Dustin may not be the most athletic guy, but…. “I dunno, you didn’t look that bad.”

“Ha! Right….” Dustin breathes out a laugh, shaking his head the entire time. “You’re a kind soul, Miss Hopper.”

“Why thank you, Mr. Henderson,” El says with a giggle of her own as they near the entrances to the locker rooms. “And with that, it’s time for me to say goodbye. See you tomorrow?” she asks as she pauses in front of the door to the girls’ locker room.

“Yep! See you tomorrow!” Dustin gives her a wave and heads into the boys’ locker room.

El heads into the girls’ side a little hurried – she does need to get ready to head off to photography – but she stops when she sees Jennifer down one of the rows of lockers, all by herself as she changes out of her gym clothes.

El stands there for a second, biting her lip in contemplation, thinking of what she should do. Her anger from before lunch has faded – making friends with the Drama Club kids helped with that – and now El’s just a little sad. Sad because it sucks that people like Stacey and the others feel like they can look down on people like they do without even knowing. But also sad because the way she reacted was petty and childish. How’s the saying go? Be the change you want to see in the world?

So, with that in mind, El sucks in a deep breath and takes a small detour down to go talk to Jen. “Hey,” she calls out when she gets close enough, noticing how, unfortunately, Jen jumps a little at the sound of her voice.

Jennifer gives her a smile, though she’s only turned partially towards El to give it. “Um, hi.”

El swallows roughly, gathering a little bit of courage and swallowing a little bit of her pride. “I, um, just wanted to say that I’m sorry. For ditching you guys at lunch.”

Jennifer just shrugs. “It’s ok, you have other friends to sit with, apparently.” She pauses, fingers loosely clutching her gym shirt after pulling it off over her head. “It’s just-” She cuts off abruptly, eyes cutting away as her face falls.

“What?” El asks, quiet and a little unsure.
Jen breathes in and turns to face El completely. “I thought that, maybe, we were becoming friends. But you got mad at us and I don’t know why.”

Guilt stabs not-so-gently right in the center of El’s heart and she cringes, unable to stop. But, she sighs; Jennifer at least deserves an explanation. “It’s just, the way you and the others wrote off Lily and her friends and other people in Drama Club. That kind of stuff makes me angry. Like, they’re nice people. Sure, they’re not popular like you and Stacey are. And they may have weird or specialized interests, but they’re still people like most everyone else.”

Jen blinks, a light, embarrassed blush crawling up her cheeks. “Wow, I didn’t know you felt like that. I’m, um, I’m sorry.”

It’s El’s turn to shrug. “It’s ok,” she says. “It’s not like I’m expecting you to be friends with them, too. Just, if you still want to be friends, you gotta understand that I like being friends with everyone.” El gives Jen a smile, hoping she’s coming across as welcoming and reassuring. Because, for all that’s happened over the past few hours, she still actually likes Jen (Stacey, on the other hand, is still up for debate). “So...can we still be friends?”

Jen looks at El for a long moment, El completely unsure what’s going on behind the carefully neutral expression on the other girl’s face, before she smiles and nods. “Of course we can still be friends! You’re still, like, really cool and nice and stuff. And you’re still trying out for Pep Squad, right?”

Relief that the drama seems to be over washes through El and she smiles back. “Oh, you couldn’t stop me from trying out for Pep Squad. It’s one of the things I’m super excited about, actually.”

“Oh, good,” Jen says, shoulders relaxing as she sighs. “And, I’ll try to be more understanding about who you’re friends with, watch what I say and stuff. Though, I can’t promise the others will be the same.”

El shrugs. “I’m not too worried. Either they’re ok with it or they’re not. And I’ll make sure to have lunch with you guys tomorrow, maybe even apologize to the others for being kind of a bitch earlier. Sound good?”

“Sounds good to me,” Jen says before she lets out a quiet giggle. “I’m glad we were able to clear this up. I was worried after you left to go to your locker.”

El’s smile turns a little cringey. “Yeah, and I think you were probably the only one who noticed I was angry.”

Jen waves a dismissive hand. “I’m just pretty good at reading people’s emotions, most of the time,” she says. “I could kind of pick up that you were annoyed and maybe a little mad. But you’re good at hiding your feelings, did you know that?”

“Yeah, I know,” El shrugs, not really wanting to talk about this anymore. “Anyway, I should get changed and then head off to Elective. See you tomorrow?”

“Sounds good,” Jen says with a perky nod. “Bye, El!”

El trills her fingers at Jen in a wave and goes back to getting ready to head off to photography, happy that this seems, at least, like it’s fully and finally behind her.

Onward and forward.
There is pretty much nowhere more disgusting than the boys’ locker room after football practice. Not just in the physical sense (though that is undeniably true). But also in the mental sense in that the shit that boys talk about when there are no girls around are just disgusting.

Mike wishes he didn’t know this. He wishes he could just shower and get dressed after Cross Country practice in peace. But with the Football team finishing their practice at the same time, well, there’s not room on campus for two locker rooms, so the teams have to share.

Which means Mike gets to hear every gross, dirty comment the boys on the football team are making, ones that don’t even bear repeating to anyone else, they’re so disgusting.

*God, if this is what it means to be friends with more popular guys, then count me out,* Mike thinks as he dries off after his shower.

He’s standing in front of the locker where he’s stashed his stuff and trying his best to remember how to let the gross, demeaning comments about girls go in one ear and out the other. It helps when he starts cataloging his various aches and pains from his first team practice of any kind since Swim season ended back in May.

Mike tried to keep up with exercising over the summer, running a couple of times a week. But Cross Country is a different beast and Mike knows it’s going to be a few weeks before he gets his sea legs back, so to speak.

But, for the moment, he’s going to have to deal with the remnants of a stitch in his side and quads and calves that are sore and tight. There are stretches he knows he can do, but he’s going to have to wait until he gets home – he’s not going to do them here in this god-forsaken locker room.

Mike’s running through the litany of stretches he wants to do and the ice packs he knows are waiting for him when he gets home when perhaps the only thing that could pull his attention to the cesspit of a conversation behind him happens:

“Did you see the new girl today? El Hopper?”

Mike’s ears immediately perk up at the mention of El’s name, his attention pulled from thoughts of stretching and ice packs.

“Oh yeah, I saw her.” Mike’s not sure who the first person who spoke was, but the second guy is Zach Mercer, just about the biggest douche in the entire school. *Just because he’s a hotshot football player does not make him god’s gift to society,* Mike thinks with a scowl.

And the tone of voice he’s using to respond to the question about El? Well, it sets Mike’s nerves on edge. Mike can fucking hear the leer he’s sure is on Zach’s face. And, unable to help himself, Mike glances down the row to where Zach and his boneheaded buddies are undressing to head to the showers. Sure enough, the look on Zach’s face is predatory and perverted and it makes Mike’s skin crawl.

“Man, she was smoking in that bad girl get up. And her tits in that tank top? Mm, I know what I’m going to be thinking about tonight.” This comes from Derek Mason, probably the most popular guy in school after Zach and Mike, standing there trying desperately not to look like he’s listening in, begins to see red.

*God, he hates* how so many of the jocks and popular guys talk about girls like they’re physical objects, no more than pieces of meat put here for their enjoyment only. It’s like they don’t even think
of girls as people, as human beings with personalities and desires of their own. It disgusts him to no end that there are people like Zach and Derek out there in the world.

And yet, as much as he hates himself for it, the primal, hormonal part of him can’t help but enthusiastically agree with everything Derek is saying.

*Everything.*

(and, really, it’s just not fair how effortlessly beautiful El is and how attracted Mike is to her. god, the way she makes him feel – the way he dreamed about her, despite how it’s only been one night between meeting her and now. how he can’t seem to stop thinking about the things his fantasies weave together for him, the way his body reacts to it. it’s only been one day since El Hopper walked into his life and she’s gotten him all turned around and upside down from the sweetest, most pleasurable torture he’s ever felt.

honestly, how’s he supposed to survive when it feels like he’s being burned from the inside out?)

“Oh, I don’t deny that rack is fucking fantastic," Zach says, roughly stripping off his jersey. “But have you seen that ass? She was walking away from me in that flirty fucking skirt and I just – man, I wanted to bend her over, flip up that skirt and-” Zach finishes his statement with a crude gesture of both his hands and his hips and all Zach’s friends laugh and jeer as Mike swallows against the revulsion that slithers down his spine. It’s partly because Zach is a boor who couldn’t figure out how to respect women if it was pointed out to him on a map. But it’s also partly because the idea of El with someone like Zach makes Mike want to throw up.

“You get her to go out with you, Mercer?” one of the other guys asks.

“No, not you – bitch is playing hard to get,” Zach says and Mike glances out of the corner of his eye to see Zach grinning triumphantly, like it’s only a matter of time before he gets his way. “You know how chicks are, man. She’s saying no, no, no. But that body of hers is saying yes. She wants me, I can tell. It’s that fire in her eyes, you know? She’s just playing her fucking game, but soon I’ll have her begging for me to give it to her.”

That makes Mike’s heartbeat all but stop as it feels like his heart falls into his stomach. He thinks back to earlier in the day, when he’d been certain El had been flirting with him – all coy smiles and lilting giggles, hands playing with her hair and cheeks coloring over with enchanting blushes. She had been flirting with him, right? Zach’s wrong about whatever signals El’s giving him, he has to be.

But, then, Mike thinks back to the times he’s spotted El during the past couple of days talking with other people. And, like with him, she’d been all smiles and bright giggles and absolutely enchanted and enchanting at the same time. Maybe that’s just how El talks with people she likes as friends.

Maybe she actually shows she’s attracted to guys by playing hard to get. Like she is with Zach.

Maybe she doesn’t like Mike at all.

Mike finishes pulling on his shirt and he slams his locker door shut, frustration at what he’s hearing and feeling needing some sort of outlet.

The loud noise catches the attention of Zach and his gang, but it’s only for a second and Mike hurries to look away so as to not give them a reason to let their attention linger any longer than that.

After that, Mike does his best to hurry and get out of there, trying his best to make it look like he’s not doing so. But he needs to get out of there, embarrassment and nausea playing a dangerous dance
in his stomach. Mike finally manages to tune out the other boys and their gross, perverted conversation as he scoops up his things and all but flees the locker room.

And, the entire time, he can’t stop thinking: has she been leading on Mike the past couple of days? Or does she not know she’s coming across as flirty? And does she really like Zach Mercer, instead?

But, perhaps Mike’s biggest question is this: is he about to get his heart broken again?

The thoughts linger like a bad taste in the back of his mouth and Mike feels the weight of them press down on his shoulders until it feels like he’s practically folded in half, slumped over as he finishes shuffling out of the locker room.

Mike makes his way out into the hallway and sees Lucas sitting on the floor across from the door to the locker room, one leg outstretched as he leans against the wall. There’s a paperback book in his hands, the cover and the first third of the pages curled back as he holds the book open, eyes scanning across the pages as he waits for Mike, who’s giving him a ride.

Mike recognizes the cover – Catch 22. Lucas has been really into reading contemporary fiction these days, especially stuff that has some sort of social commentary or satirical slant to it. It’s not Mike’s cup of tea, but who’s he to say what Lucas should and shouldn’t read?

Lucas looks up, probably alerted to Mike’s presence by movement at the edges of his peripheral vision, and he smiles for a brief instance before his lips turn down in a concerned frown. “Hey, everything ok?” Lucas asks as he stands up, dog-earring the page he’s on before flipping the book shut.

Mike hates that he wears his heart on his sleeve, that his frustration and hopeless lovesick tendencies are so hard to hide. The thought of telling Lucas everything that happened in the locker room and that’s happening in his head right now, though, makes Mike feel like he wants to be sick. But he also knows he can’t a) keep this all bottled up forever and b) that he needs to tell Lucas something. Lucas can be like a dog on a bone if he suspects there’s a problem he can help solve, especially if it’s a problem one of his friends is trying to hide.

So, Mike decides to tell Lucas the truth… just not the whole truth. “Yeah, just… the football team is in there after their practice, talking about girls and, I… well, I guess I just don’t get why girls go for guys like that.”

Lucas shrugs as the two of them start heading out towards the parking lot where Mike parked his car earlier that morning. “Wish I knew, man. I don’t think it’s that girls really like guys like that. But I think girls get caught up in hormones just like the rest of us. Plus, you know guys like football players can be pretty slick and it’s only later where their douchey side comes out.”

Mike nods along, but he’s still frowning. Is El the kind of girl to fall for Zach’s act? Part of him thinks she’s too smart for that, but he doesn’t know. It’s like Lucas said – sometimes, girls can get caught up in their hormones, too, and Mike’s secure enough to admit that Zach is a pretty good looking guy. Maybe that’s the type El goes for, the traditional, GQ-model type guy.

That would just be Mike’s luck, really.

“Hmm, yeah, I guess,” Mike says to Lucas’ point. “Still frustrating, though.” The early September late afternoon air is nice and refreshing compared to the stuffy air in the boy’s locker room and Mike and Lucas head easily over to his car, parked at the far end of the lot.

“Yeah, I know,” Lucas says. “But, man, if you’re worried about getting a girlfriend… I mean, you’ll
find one one day, you know that, right? It’s just a matter of time, I know it.”

Mike gives Lucas a tight smile as they approach his car. “I guess,” he says, wholly unconvinced – especially since the only person he wants to be his girlfriend is El and that feels like a dream so impossible, it’s not even worth dreaming. “But that’s easy for you to say seeing how as you’ve been with Max for almost 3 years now.”

“Yeah, well, then… maybe you should take my opinion as expert advice,” Lucas says, grinning. “I mean, I must know something about girls if I can keep someone like Max, right?”

Mike rolls his eyes. “Oh my god, if Max ever heard you talking about ‘keeping her’, she’d castrate you. You do know that, right?”

Lucas gives Mike a look as he prepares to duck into the passenger seat. “Please, do I look like an idiot? I mean, really.”

Mike laughs as he climbs into the driver’s seat, mind temporarily distracted from his own problems by Lucas’ dry humor, and he lets all thoughts of El and Zach fade away.

Well, for the moment, at any rate.

Max Mayfield is not an idiot.

Oh, sure, she may not be full honors track like the boys are, but she more than holds her own in Honors History and Honors Lit. Besides, she has one thing the boys don’t have: the ability to read people, to put together the pieces of how they tick and come up with a pretty accurate measure of what’s going on.

Oh, sure, sometimes she’s wrong (Exhibit A: her initial judgment of El Hopper), but most of the time, she’s right.

And, oh boy, is Max starting to put some of the pieces together.

It starts Tuesday night when she and Lucas are talking on the phone. It’s late – about 11:30 and if her mom knew she was on the phone with Lucas so late, she’d be grounded from now until eternity – and they’re talking in hushed voices about their day.

“I think something is going on with Mike,” Lucas announces mid-conversation. It’s accompanied by the sound of rustling fabric, a sign that Lucas is adjusting positions where he’s lying down in bed.

The sound sends a pang of longing through Max’s heart. Oh, how she wants to be with him right now, snuggled up next to him in bed. She loves those rare moments where they get to be together in one of their beds, when either of their houses are blissfully empty long enough to give them the luxury of time and soft sheets.

Usually, they have to make do with the back seat of either of their cars, their coupling quick and frantic and full of enough contortion to qualify them for the circus. Now, granted, they only starting having sex at the end of sophomore year, so it’s not like either of them have a lot of experience with figuring out where else they can sneak around. But, when they do get the chance to be together in either of their beds? Oh, they take it in a heartbeat.
It’s just not fair, sometimes. Max loves him so much and has all these feelings and desires and it’s so frustrating that she can’t be with him how she wants to, when she wants to.

One day, though. One day they’ll get out of this town and find a place for just the two of them, where they can be together in all the ways they want and no one will be able to stop them.

But, until then….

They’ll make do with what they have.

“Why do you think something is going on with Mike?” Max asks, her voice quiet, low and intimate. Lucas sighs. “He was all bummed after Cross Country practice today. Apparently, the guys from the football team were in there and they were talking gross shit about girls.”

“What’s that have to do with Mike?” Max asks, brow furrowing as she lays back against her pillows.

“Well, you know how he’s been since the new girl started,” Lucas says. “I mean, he hasn’t straight come out and said it, but I’m pretty sure he has a crush on El, even though it’s only been a couple of days.”

Max’s brain races through the implications of what Lucas is saying as she remembers the things she’s overheard some of the guys saying around school. And, given the kinds of things she’s overheard, Max can only imagine what football players would be saying about El behind closed doors where there were no other girls around. And, if Mike has a crush on the new girl, too, and happened to overhear those other guys talking about El…. “Oh god, he’s mopey and lovesick and probably feeling hopeless, isn’t he?”

Lucas breathes out a dry, almost humorless laugh. “What else is new? You know Mike. He’s convinced no one will ever want to be with him. Even though I swear I saw El being all flirty with him two days in a row as they walked in to Chem class together.”

“So you think El has a crush on him, too?”

“Dunno,” Lucas says. “Don’t know her well enough to know either way. But she was making goo-goo eyes at him, like, constantly. So I figure, yeah, she’s probably at least somewhat attracted to him. Which would be, like, really weird considering that she’s already super popular.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Max says with a lazy shrug. “I’m beginning to get the feeling El Hopper’s not what anyone expects.”

“Oh, that so?” Lucas asks, a teasing edge to his voice. “Since when did you get so good at reading people?”

“Since always, you dork,” Max fires back, lips curling up in a giddy grin. God, when they start teasing each other, Max just wants to dissolve into pure happiness and float away.

“Since always, you dork,” Max fires back, lips curling up in a giddy grin. God, when they start teasing each other, Max just wants to dissolve into pure happiness and float away.

“Hey, I have it on good authority that you like that I’m a dork,” Lucas says. Max can hear the smile in his voice and, suddenly, the last thing on Max’s mind is whatever is going on with Mike and the new girl.

But she doesn’t forget it.

Over the next couple of days, Max takes any opportunity to watch both Mike and El, looking for any clues that will lead her to the truth of what’s going on.
And there’s a lot that she learns.

One is that Zach Mercer is hardcore chasing El. Like seriously.

On Wednesday, El sits with the Stacey and the others during lunch, the dustup of the day before short-lived with everything apparently forgiven. And, hovering in the background almost the entire time, is Zach Mercer. He’s trying his hardest to flirt with El – harder than Max has ever seen him, to be honest.

Mike notices this, too, if the black clouds hovering over his head are any indication. He’s sullen and withdrawn all throughout lunch and the rest of the Party absolutely notices, if the looks they share mean anything. Max also doesn’t miss the way that Mike keeps glancing over at El and Zach, looking like he’s going to be ill every time he does, but also unable to stop himself from doing so.

Max kinda feels for him – she can only imagine what it’s like to feel like the person you’re developing a crush on might be into someone else and to see that someone else try to make a move on her. But Max also gets frustrated in how Mike constantly sells himself short. Yeah, she knows he’s had horrible luck with girls in the past (god, just the memory of what happened with Mike and Ashley Patterson makes her want to explode; she will never forgive that girl for what she did to Mike), but she wishes Mike knew that he has a lot to offer to the world.

But it’s still annoying and there’s not much Max can do about it.

Maybe even more annoying, though, is the second thing she learns and that is that Max can’t read anything from El when it comes what’s going on with her and Zach. Yes, she looks a little standoffish, but if she’s truly annoyed or really into it, Max can’t tell. El seems to be really good at hiding what she’s feeling behind a placid, benign smile – like she’s either trying to downplay how much she likes Zach or she’s trying to hide how much she’s annoyed by him.

Girl is too good at hiding her emotions, Max thinks with a scowl, frustrated at her lack of answers.

Except it’s obvious when El’s having a good time with other people. Over Wednesday and the first half of Thursday, whenever Max catches a glimpse of El talking with someone she’s making friends with, she looks like she’s having the greatest time. But with Zach? She’s almost flat and Max isn’t sure what that means, but she has no way of finding out more.

And then, on Thursday, something interesting happens.

It’s a gorgeous day outside and the last thing the Party wants is to sit inside during lunch. It’s Lucas who makes the suggestion that they eat lunch out on the bleachers by the football field, away from the general population of Hawkins High, where they can eat in peace and enjoy the nice weather.

After waiting to get their food from the cafeteria line, the 5 of them make their way out of the cafeteria, trays in hand despite the fact that they’re not supposed to take them outside. “No one ever checks,” is what Dustin says as they head out the doors. And this is true – for all the fact that there’s a rule against taking cafeteria trays outside of the cafeteria, there’s no one around to enforce it.

So, after Dustin’s comment, no one really thinks twice as they head outside and towards the bleachers, laughing and talking as they go.

It’s only when they’re nearly to the bleachers where it becomes clear that the Party isn’t the only one
who had the idea.

Because, laying down on one of the benches, head pillowed by her backpack while an open brown lunch bag sits behind her head, is El Hopper.

At first, Max is the only person who sees her – the boys are too busy talking amongst themselves, leaving Max to guide them and scout out the best spot to sit – and she nearly stops in her tracks. Instead, she just slows, taking in the scene in front of her.

El’s dressed pretty casually today, wearing tight jeans and light grey t-shirt with what looks like a graphic of ‘Jem and the Holograms’, but Max can’t tell for sure since El’s lying down. El’s hair is up in a loose bun and she has earbuds in her ears, head bopping along lightly to whatever song she’s listening to as she reads a thick, paperback book held in both hands. She’s completely outstretched on the bench, feet crossed at the ankles, one foot tapping the air in time with the beat her head’s bopping to. She looks content, is the only word that Max can think of, like she’s having a nice, quiet lunch, just herself and her music and a good book.

It’s really not an activity Max would ever picture a popular girl enjoying. But, as she’s coming to find, El Hopper is anything but a typical popular girl.

“Oh, hey, isn’t that El?” Dustin asks just off to Max’s left.

“Yeah, um, she looks busy. Maybe we should go somew-” Mike starts to say, voice scared and unsure, but Max doesn’t let him finish. Not when this could be her chance to start to get some answers to these pieces that just don’t quite fit together.

“Hey, let’s go sit with her!” Max says as she all but charges in the direction of where El’s laying on the bleachers, leaving the boys to follow or get left behind.

Lucas calls after her. “Max, wait–!” But it’s too late to change course and Max begins to climb the few rows to where El is laying only a handful of seconds later.

The jostling of the bleachers catches El by surprise, because she jumps a bit, startled as she sits up in rush while one hand reaches to take out an earbud. She looks over in Max’s direction and blinks like she’s not sure what she’s seeing. “Max?”

Max smiles, quietly apologizing for surprising El with her facial expression. “Hey, mind if we join you for lunch?”

El arches an eyebrow. “‘We’?” She peers behind Max to see the rest of the Party, who are all standing behind her, Max notices with a near shake of her head, with trays held in awkward hands, feet shuffling a little in uncertainty.

God, what dorks….

Max looks back over at El in time to see her smile, a bright, welcoming expression that is just beautiful. Seriously, if Mike really does have a crush on El, Max can certainly see why. “Yeah, sure, the more, the merrier!” El says as she folds her legs up in front of her, hands absently dog-earring the page of the book she’s on before she removes the other earbud.

The faint strains of whatever music she’s listening to can be heard through the earbuds, tinny and sounding very far away, and Max’s curiosity is piqued. “Whatcha listening to?” she asks.

El looks around at the Party before her gaze cuts away a bit, a light blush crawling up her cheeks. It’s so endearing looking, that Max makes sure to look where Mike is settling down on the bench one
row down, between Dustin and Lucas, to see if he’s watching.

And, boy, is he, Max notices, biting back a smile at the near-enraptured look on Mike’s face. It’s only there for a split-second, though, before it fades, replaced with a look that is going for neutral and unaffected. But Max can see the hints of the sad scowl and she wonders what’s going on in Mike’s head.

“You guys have to promise not to make fun of me,” El says, bringing Max’s attention back to the question she’d asked just a second ago about what music El’s listening to.

“We’re not the most judgmental bunch,” Will says from where he’s sitting on the other side of El. “I’m Will, by the way.”

El smiles at Will. “Yeah, you’re in my Chem class. I remember you,” she says as she reaches for her phone and the headphone jack. “Ok, here goes.” El unplugs her headphones so everyone else can hear her music and it’s… Dr. Dre? Yeah, this is Dr. Dre, alright – “Forgot About Dre”, if Max isn’t mistaken.

Max blinks, taken aback a little. Ok, she never would have expected that.

“Oh man, you like rap?” Lucas asks, an amused guffaw spilling from his lips. One of the things Lucas likes that he keeps mostly to himself is that, when he’s alone or when Max is there, he likes listening to rap. Max thinks it has to do with the fact that he’s one of the only black kids in Hawkins, that he doesn’t want to give anyone any more ammunition than they already have, but that he also wants to get and stay in touch with black culture. It’s not something they’ve really talked about and Max hasn’t really wanted to push it, but she knows she supports him no matter what.

“Yeah, I mean, I’m not, like, a fine connoisseur or anything, but my dad’s partner back in New York was an African American woman about 10 years younger than him and she used to watch after me when my dad sometimes needed help. She introduced me to 90s rap when I was, like 10 and it kinda stuck,” El says. “I like the verses. They’re fun to sing.”

As Max watches, Lucas raises an eyebrow in subtle challenge as Eminem sings the chorus, a smirk pulling up those lips she loves so much. An answering smile mirrors itself on El’s face, her own eyebrows arching in return.

And then, like they rehearsed it or something, when the verse picks back up, Lucas and El start to rap along with the song in perfect sync.

Max lets out a breathless laugh, amused and shocked by equal turn. The rest of the Party has near identical looks of shock on their face, jaws dropped like they’re having a hard time figuring out exactly what is going on. Meanwhile, Lucas and El look like they’re having the time of their lives, firing off lyrics in rapid succession somehow without tripping over their own tongues, like they’re speaking a language no one else knows.

This goes on for less than a minute and, when the verse ends and the song begins to close out, Lucas and El just explode with laughter.

“You know, for a popular girl, you’re alright,” Lucas says as he reaches out a hand for El to shake. “I’m Lucas.”

“Nice to meet you, Lucas,” El says, mirth written across every inch of her face, embedded in her voice. “I’m coming to discover that popular girls are a certain way around here, aren’t they?”

“That’s putting it mildly,” Max says as she begins to eat her food.
At that, El pulls a face, glancing down at the tray on Max’s lap. “God, I have no idea how you can eat that,” El says. “It’s only been a few days, but I’ve completely given up on the cafeteria food here.” She punctuates her point by reaching for the brown paper bag and pulling out a small, zip-loc bag full of crackers. “Like, I’d rather wake up 5 minutes earlier and throw a bunch of food in a bag than eat that.”

Max shrugs. “To each their own, I guess.”

“Was the cafeteria food better at your school in New York?” Will asks.

El shifts to look over at him. “Hmm, not really. But there were options of places just off campus to go get food. We didn’t have a closed campus or anything, so people would go around the corner and grab, like, pizza and stuff. There was this falafal place a couple minutes away that I really liked going to.” She pauses, sighing, a faraway look of longing on her face. “Man, I miss that place.”

“Yeah, Hawkins isn’t exactly ground zero for falafal,” Dustin says. “So, sorry about that.”

El lets out a giggle. “Well, that’s ok. Besides, there’s plenty of other things around here I like that makes up for it.”

And that’s when Max sees it. Wait… is that…?

Oh, it is. It’s a blink-and-you-miss-it moment, but, when El speaks, she looks over at Mike, her hand quickly coming up to tuck a loose lock of hair behind her ear, the twist of her wrist delicate and flirty. Her eyes linger on him maybe a little longer than a second, full of warmth and hope and longing, but it’s enough for Max to get an inkling of what’s going on.

Just ‘things’ you like, hmm?

And, as the rest of lunch goes by, her suspicions are only confirmed. Well, at least somewhat.

Mike 100% has a crush on El. And El? Well, if she doesn’t return his feelings, she sure as hell is at least physically attracted to him.

Max spends the next 30 minutes trying to watch the two as subtly as possible and she quickly loses count of the number of times she spots Mike and El stealing glances at each other out of the corner of their eyes, like no one else is supposed to notice or anything. Mike looks like he wishes he could stop himself from doing so and, if Max had to guess, El looks like she wishes she never had to look away.

And then there’s the fact that whenever Mike says anything, El pretty much always immediately comes back with some witty, just-shy-of-outrageously flirty response directed almost solely at him. Each time, there’s a look that crosses Mike’s face, like he doesn’t understand what’s going on for a second, but it always settles into a look that is a cross between surprised and happy. It’s almost rude with how not subtle it is.

Seriously, they’ve known each other for less than a week and they’re already solidly in the shy, flirty stage. Ridiculous.

Only, it is pretty subtle. It’s just that Max is paying really close attention. She knows how to read Mike pretty well and it seems like El’s trying to downplay whatever she’s feeling on her end to not be so obvious. But Max is good at reading body language and, well, El’s giving off some serious nerd-loving vibes right now.

Huh, will wonders never cease, Max thinks at one point during lunch.
About 5 minutes before the warning bell is due to ring, El starts to gather up her things. “Well, I hate to cut this short, but I need to run to my locker to grab a couple of things,” she says as she stands up, backpack slipping onto her shoulders. “But, it was nice eating lunch with you guys. Maybe we can do it again sometime?” There’s a hopeful smile on her face that is still somehow confident and Max really wishes she knew how El does that.

“You’re welcome to join us anytime,” Will says.

“Just come on over whenever,” Dustin says.

“Yeah, you’re surprisingly cool, El Hopper,” Lucas chimes in with. And Max finds herself agreeing. Plus, there’s just something about how El fits in with the Party that tugs at something deep in her heart, some sense of rightness that no amount of rationalizing can shake.

“Well, back ‘atcha,” El says with a playful wink as she begins to make her way down the bleachers. She pauses to look at Mike, who’s looking back up at her like she both hung the moon in the sky and has the power to break his heart into itty bitty pieces.

Honestly, it’s so adorable and heart-wrenching, Max almost can’t take it.

“I’ll, um, see you in US History, yeah?” El says to Mike, one hand fidgeting with the loose end of her backpack strap.

Mike smiles up at her and nods, hair bouncing with just how enthusiastic it is. “Oh, yeah, of course. Um, see you in a bit.”

At that, El lets out an almost breathless giggle, head cocking to one side at what Max can only describe as a flirtatious angle. “Can’t wait,” she says and, if Max isn’t mistaken, her voice pitches just that much higher. El looks back at the rest of them and gives them all a wave, trilling her fingers in a motion that Max isn’t afraid to admit is absolutely adorable. “Bye guys!”

With that, El takes off down the rest of the bleachers while the Party gets back to finishing up their lunch.

And, if Mike watches El go until she’s completely out of sight, unable to look away before turning back to the rest of them with a wistful, hopeful look on his face - like he's praying, hoping she doesn't break his heart - Max is the only one who notices.

As the Party heads back inside a few minutes later, Max can’t stop thinking about the entire last half hour. She lets her thoughts linger on the easy, effortless way El flirted with Mike, subtle enough so that the other guys wouldn't notice, but enough that Max is pretty sure Mike did. El is a bright, beautiful girl, filled with easy smiles and enchanting laughter and Max wonders if El's aware just how easily boys fall in love with girls like her.

Max also can’t help but let her thoughts linger on how Mike's warring emotions, just beneath the surface, set the line of his shoulders tight and tense, like he was trying to hold himself back but unable to do so entirely. Every time he smiled at El or said something that got a reaction out of her, he looked surprised, like girls like El aren't supposed to smile back or giggle or do anything that remotely signals their attraction to guys like Mike. He looks like he's on the constant edge of waiting for the other shoe to drop, like he's waiting to be horribly disappointed and unable to stop himself from getting his hopes up at the same time.

Max wonders if El knows, has any clue about the pain that's lingering in Mike's past, about the ways his heart has been toyed with before.
She just hopes *so badly* that, whatever El clearly feels for Mike, it's not just a superficial thing, that it's the beginning of something *more*. That she doesn't want to just love him and leave him, toy with him or use him for whatever flibbertigibbet amusement she wants to get out of him before dropping him and moving on to the next thing.

Because, otherwise, Max isn't sure if Mike's heart will survive.

But, it's too soon to tell anything, really. El's only been here for a few days, not enough time for Max to know for sure.

So she'll watch and wait, ready to step in to protect her friend.

And pray, to whatever power that might be listening, that she doesn't have to.

Chapter End Notes

So, whaddya think? Please let me know! I hope y'all enjoyed it!

I'm not exactly sure I know when the next chapter is coming out, but hopefully before season 3 premieres (omg you guys, we're SO CLOSE NOW). But, in the meantime, if you want to flail with me about mileven and Stranger Things in general, come hit me up on tumblr! I'm @fatechica there (yes, yes, this is my brand and i refuse to let it go). Otherwise, I'll catch y'all on the flip side!
young flames and burning embers

Chapter Notes

Well, hello everyone!

So, miraculously, this only took me two weeks and you can probably thank that holy shit amazing trailer for that!

(side note, god, i’ve never been more excited or scared for a piece of media in my entire life, i stg)

But, also, it probably has something to do with the fact that I got to around the 10k work mark and realized that I was, once again, only half way through with the things I wanted to get done. But, I felt like this was a good place to stop for the chapter.

But, before I let you guys to go enjoy this, I just wanna take a moment and give a shout out to all my thirsty bitches in the GC. You all know who you are.

(and you are extra, extra thirsty)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s a gorgeous day outside – sun shining, blue skies, birds chirping – the kind of day meant to be spent outside with friends.

But, as Mike just does that, surrounded by his friends as they eat outside on the bleachers, none of that matters.

Because he’s too busy staring after El as she walks away, enchanted by the way the sun gleams off the honey chestnut strands held up in a loose bun, hypnotized by the gentle sway of her hips beneath tight denim.

El Hopper, as Mike is coming to realize, is effortlessly beautiful. Today, she’s wearing a gray tee with an 80s cartoon print on the front, and a pair of acid-washed jeans that hug her hips and thighs in a way that makes his mouth water.

It seems, no matter what El’s wearing, that she has the ability to rob him of all thought and sense. Hell, she could be wearing a burlap sack and Mike would still think she’s the most beautiful girl in the entire universe.

And she can’t wait to see him.

But, is that actually true? Is El really looking forward to seeing him, so much so that she was compelled to mention it, even though they’re going to be in the same classroom in a matter of minutes?

It seems farfetched and too good to be true, the kind of too-good-to-be-true that Mike has learned never to trust. Which, honestly, just brings him back around to wondering what in the hell El wants
from him… and if it’s him she really wants.

To say that Mike’s been in a mood since Tuesday after school is, well… a massive understatement. Zach’s words that afternoon in the locker room have burrowed under Mike’s skin. God, just the thought that Zach is interested in El makes his blood boil, never mind the knowledge that Zach is actively pursuing her.

Mike’d nearly been sick yesterday during lunch, watching Zach hover around El like a doting suitor. And, despite the nausea that’d crept up his throat and destroyed his appetite, Mike had watched the two of them like a hawk, desperate for any hint of El’s true feelings, hoping despite himself.

It had been an exercise in failure. El showed almost no reaction to Zach’s attempts to get her attention or pull her into a conversation. She’d been flat, muted, almost aloof, hiding either deep annoyance… or deep attraction, Mike’s not sure which much to his dismayed confusion.

It was just such a contract to how El is with him, Mike realizes. Not that they’ve really spent much time together. Yes, they share 3 classes, but the chances to just socialize have been limited to mere minutes at the beginning and end of each class. Hell, until lunch today, Mike hadn’t heard El speak for more than a few minutes at a time – all in all, not enough time to really get to know someone.

And yet, Mike’s interactions with El just feel different than the ones he’s noticed her have with Zach. Gorgeous smiles and heart-thumping giggles; flirtatious winks and enchanting eyes; the delicate, sensual twist of her wrist as she flips her hair over her shoulder, fingertips just brushing against the skin of her neck like she’s tempting him into following along with his own fingers….

God, every word she’s said to him feels like it’s been tattooed on his heart and the fierce blaze of intelligence in her eyes when they talk is nearly blinding, it’s so intense. El is lively and bright and beautiful and Mike can’t help but be drawn to her like a moth to a flame, not when she’s so open and inviting.

So, yeah, it’s like night and day compared to how he’s seen her with Zach. It should be encouraging, but Mike doesn’t trust it. He can’t, not after what happened with Ashley. It’d been like this, too… or, at least, it felt like it had – gentle flirting, sweet gazes, words that wove a spell around his heart….

And Mike had believed – oh, oh he’d believed. She’d made him believe and, in the end, it had all been a lie. In the end, he’d –

No, we are not going there right now, Mike chides himself with a fierce mental shake. But that doesn’t stop the way his heart squeezes in pain and anger. The immediacy of the hurt has faded, but the scars are still there, etched deep on his heart.

Sometimes it feels like the universe doesn’t want him to have nice things ever. Which is partly why he can’t trust or explain the reason behind what his gut is telling him: that El Hopper, beyond all earthly reason, seems to like him, maybe even how he likes her. After all, how else to explain the way she flirts with him and smiles at him and looks at him with a gaze so bright and inviting, it nearly makes him forget his name?

She’s playing with you, that’s how. She’ll toy with you and make you believe before she humiliates you and takes it all away, the ugly voice in the back of his head says just before El disappears entirely from view.

That voice is the reason why he can’t believe. That voice is the thing that keeps him safe.

That voice is the thing that keeps him miserable.
But, try as he might, Mike can’t get rid of it or find a way to ignore it. It’s his albatross, the weight around his neck that holds him back, locked to him like a ball and chain.

In some ways, it would be easier if El had never moved to Hawkins. Because then Mike wouldn’t have to wrestle so hard with just how unhappy and hurt he is. It was easier before to pretend that girls don’t exist, especially after everything that’s happened.

But how could one even begin to ignore the shining light that is El Hopper? It’s not like he’s superhuman, or anything – he’s just not that strong.

El makes her way inside and Mike feels himself sag a bit once he can no longer see her, both in disappointment and relief. It’s odd, to constantly want to be in her presence but welcoming the break so he can have the space to breathe and think. But Mike’s quickly coming around to the idea that logic just doesn’t apply when it comes to his feelings for El.

“Hey, man, you ok? You’re staring off into space.” Lucas’ voice pulls Mike back into the here and now and a fierce blush of embarrassment begins to heat up his cheeks as he realizes he got caught up in staring at El. Again.

But, before Mike can even try to spin up an excuse, Max’s voice fills the silence. “Look at his face. Probably just overheating from the sun. You know he’s pale and pasty from spending all that time in his basement. Isn’t that right, Wheeler?” Max looks over at him, one eyebrow arched teasingly over a gaze that is too knowing, like she knows what Mike was really staring at.

Or who.

It’s strange, being both grateful and annoyed at the same time, and Mike channels that feeling into giving Max a withering look. “Oh, ha ha, Mayfield. You’re just as pale as I am, you know.”

“Never said I wasn’t,” Max says as she begins cleaning up her tray to bring back inside, which signals the rest of them to do the same. “But you’re just too much fun to tease, Mikey,” she says with an over-the-top cutesy voice.

Mike’s only response is to flip Max off, setting everyone off into light-hearted laughter that only begins to fade as they stand up and start making their way off the bleachers.

Mike lets himself bask in the gentle teasing of his friends, born from kindness instead of mockery, and, for a few minutes, he’s able to almost completely forget about El.

Of course, that doesn’t last. By the time he’s peeled himself away from the rest of the Party to head off to US History, thoughts of El begin to seep back into his brain.

The thought of sitting next to her for the next hour (and he knows he will – it only takes a couple of days for chosen seats to become effectively assigned seats and given the past week, Mike is clearly sitting next to El in both Trig and US History for the rest of the school year) makes his whole body buzz with excitement, both wonderfully and torturously. His skin thrums and every nerve feels electrified, like he’s just shy of vibrating through the floor with the eager energy running through him.

It’s a delicious feeling, one that scares the shit out of him with just how intense it is. But there’s no avoiding it and Mike’s smart enough not to try. He recognizes a losing battle when he sees one.

By the time Mike’s approached the door to his history class, his heart feels like it’s threatening to take up permanent residence in his throat, he’s so nervous and excited. And for good reason, it seems.
Because El’s already seated in her usual seat, textbook open on the desktop in front of her, she’s got an open notebook sitting on top that she’s writing in, eyes glancing back and forth from the pages of the textbook to the pages her notebook. The look in her eyes is one of fierce and unyielding concentration, all sharp intelligent and indomitable focus.

It’s a damn attractive sight, a girl that beautiful and that smart. El almost doesn’t seem real, like she’s something he just dreamed up. But Mike knows that, for as wild as his imagination gets, not even he is inventive enough to create someone like her.

No, El is as real as he is and that’s equal parts electrifying and frightening.

Mike sucks in a deep breath and makes his way across the classroom to his seat, steps as smooth and confident as he can make them. He wishes he could do more, that he could stand taller (metaphorically speaking, of course), but he knows this is as good as it’s going to get.

Once he’s close enough, El spots him out of the corner of her eye and her head snaps up so she can look at him. “Hey, look who made it,” she says, an excited smile curving up luscious lips.

Mike plops down into his seat and tries to ignore the way his heart pitter-patters in his chest. “Made it,” he says. “Sorry to keep you waiting.” He feels himself smiling in return, like his facial expressions are completely outside the realm of his control. It’s just, when she smiles at him so prettily, it’s hard not to smile back.

“You better be sorry,” El says with a playful pout. “I don’t like to be kept waiting. I’m afraid I’m terribly impatient.”

For a moment, Mike’s dumbstruck by the sight of that lower lip, stuck out in probably the most alluring pout he’s ever seen. His own lips tingle with the urge to lean over and capture that lower lip between them, to press against her mouth and feel it glide against his own. Mike swallows hard and pushes past the enticing vision dancing in his mind’s eye. “Didn’t know you were so eager for my company,” he says, the words spilling out before he can fully process them, and Mike holds back a cringe. Oh god, did he just say that?

El arches an eyebrow in playful acknowledgment and, why yes, he did just say that. But before he can fully sink into embarrassment, El responds. “Well, you can’t really blame me, can you?” she says, smile turning shy and flirty and holy shit.

Mike stares at her, gobsmacked. Did she just… is she actually saying…? But Mike can’t even begin to unpack and process all that before El starts speaking again. “I like spending time with you,” she says, her gaze softening above cheeks that fill with the most enticing blush. “It was nice, by the way, having lunch with your friends. I hope we do it again sometime.”

“You sure you’re ready for another round of Dustin’s tall tales of conspiracy? I mean, he puts ‘The X-Files’ to shame,” Mike quips, lips twisting with a grin. Ok, if he can just focus on being in the moment, he can ignore the prickling along the back of his neck, the way embarrassment wants to creep up his spine and slump his shoulders, or how every irrational warning bell is going off in the back of his head, telling him that he shouldn’t be enjoying this as much as he is. But it’s easy to be in the moment when El smiles at him like she’s doing right now. Too easy.

El lets out a bright laugh, just a little bit more than a giggle, and she reaches for him, hand coming out to slap lightly against his shoulder, all playful and flirty. Her palm presses against his bicep briefly, her touch firm and warm, before she pulls away. The contact lasts less than a second, but it sends a jolt running through him regardless, his entire body lighting up at the feel of her hand against
him, however briefly, a silent gasp bubbling up in his throat.

Sure, the sleeve of his t-shirt is between his arm and her hand, but it still feels like her hand on his arm leaves a firebrand against his skin, every nerve is so lit up. And if he wasn’t wide awake before, Mike certainly would be now, her touch like a shock to the system, and all he knows is that he desperately wants to feel it again.

“You’re so funny,” El says, a giggle in her voice.

Mike grins. “Really? You sure you didn’t hit your head as a child or something?”

*That* earns him a loud snort that devolves into giggles and pride like he’s never experienced before fills him. That he can make El laugh like this, all cute giggles with the cutest, goddamn snort he’s ever heard in his entire life (*seriously, it’s just precious*), makes him feel like he’s on top of the world.

“No, stop, please,” El says between giggles, one hand coming up to delicately cover her face, the back of her hand just barely pressed to her lips. “That’s, like, a joke my dad and I share all the time.”

“That you hit your head as a kid?” Mike asks as El’s giggles calm down. “That’s… interesting.” Mike can’t imagine what it would be like to have inside jokes with his dad about stuff like that. It just sounds so incomprehensible and Mike can’t help but envy El a little that she gets to experience that kind of stuff with her dad.

“Yeah, my dad and I have a weird relationship,” El says, her smile sobering as her giggles finally end. “For a long time, it’s just been the two of us, so we’ve developed a lot of in-jokes and references.” She blushes a bit and glances away. “I’m sure people think we’re strange.”

“No!” Mike rushes to say. “No, that sounds awesome! It’s cool that you and your dad have such a close relationship.” Mike pauses, snorting with derision. “My dad and I are, like, the complete opposite. I swear, he’s like an alien or a pod person or something.”

El looks over at him, then – not with pity, but with *empathy*. The look in her eyes is so warm and open, Mike wants to drown it it. “I’m sorry to hear that,” she says, voice dipping, all low and intimate. “Everyone should have a good relationship with their parents.”

Mike swallows roughly, caught off guard by the sudden sympathy coming his way and he shrugs, trying to push down the emotions that swell and churn in his stomach. “Yeah, well, you know how these things go,” he says lamely. God, he wishes so badly he could go back in time 20 seconds and make sure to steer the conversation away from this suddenly very uncomfortable place. Of all the things he’d rather talk with El about, his deteriorated relationship with his parents is not one of them.

It’s like El must sense his discomfort because she smiles brightly and lets out a breezy laugh, making it look easy all at the same time. “Well, if you ever need your daily recommended amount of dad jokes, you can come over to my house any time. My dad’s *full* of them, all of them guaranteed to make you roll your eyes.”

Mike arches an eyebrow, desperate for the out El’s giving him. “I’ll keep that in mind,” he says, a small grin on his face. “Though isn’t your dad the new police chief? I thought he was supposed to be scary.”

At that, El groans. “Oh, he wants you to *think* he’s scary,” she says, a wry grin. “But he’s really just a big teddy bear. And you can go ahead and tell that to everyone you know. It’s my mission in life to undermine him.”

Mike can’t help it: he laughs. “Does your dad *know* this?” he says through his chuckles.
“Oh, he does,” El says with a perky nod, smiling so bright it’s almost blinding. “I’ve told him many, many times. Like I told you – he and I have a strange relationship.”

A reply builds on Mike’s tongue, but before he can get it out, the bell rings and class officially begins. He jumps, caught off guard by the sound of the bell, and looks around to see that pretty much everyone else has filed in while he and El were talking. It seems, again, that he completely missed the rest of the world happening around him as he talked with El, getting easily lost in her sheer, overwhelming presence. It’s like nothing else exists whenever she’s nearby, the rest of the world fading away to less than background noise.

Embarrassed at being caught up again, he looks over at El to see her looking right back. He catches her eye and, the moment he does, she quirks her eyebrow at him, a flirty expression that makes his heart race in his chest. Amusement dances in her gaze and the corners of her lips turn up just slightly, like she’s trying to hold back her mirth. Whatever else might be going on inside her head, it’s clear that El doesn’t regret at all spending her precious free minutes talking to him, getting to know him. In fact, it doesn’t look like there’s anything she’d rather be doing than this. And Mike’s not really sure what to make of it. A complicated mixture of emotion fills him, then – one part wary, one part confused, one part elated. It’s an exhausting, heady mixture, one that makes his head spin with how overwhelmed it makes him.

And yet, beneath it all, like a soft, steady beat nestled deep in his soul, is the gentle warmth of contentment, the feeling that he’s exactly where he needs to be at exactly the right time. He’s not fully aware of it yet – no, all of his other emotions are way too loud and demanding, drowning out everything else.

But it’s there, safe and warm, protected by Mike’s lack of self-awareness, waiting for the right time to make itself known. And it’s growing, slowly but steadily, into peace, into happiness…

And, when he’s ready, into love.

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Ok, it’s official: it’s been a great day. El’s starting to get into the groove of her new school; she’s settling into her classes and making new friends; and she got to eat lunch with Mike.

Oh, sure, the rest of his friends were there, including Max and Dustin who she’s been starting to get close to over the course of the week. But, for almost a half an hour, El got to sit inches away from Mike and talk with him and hear him laugh and watch him interact with his friends up close and, god, her heart feels like it’s going to explode.

She’s crushing on him so hard, El wouldn’t be shocked if the entire universe knew. But she’s too happy with how this makes her feel to be at all embarrassed. After all, why should she be embarrassed? There’s nothing wrong with a girl having a crush on a cute boy.

An exceptionally cute boy, the voice in the back of her head takes care to remind her. Like she’d forgotten, or something.

Please. Like El could ever forget how cute Mike is. And how handsome. And how attractive he is, with that hair and those cheekbones and, god, those lips….

El gives herself a mental shake as she heads to her locker after photography. Ok, down girl, she
chides herself, trying to calm her now-racing heart. She does need to make it to the police station in one piece and bring stuck in a lovesick stupor really isn’t going to help.

So, as El packs up her things, she occupies her mind by thinking about Mike’s friends. So… her brain really doesn’t go far, much as she tries.

Max and Dustin she already knows – or, rather, she’s getting to know. And that’s after a bit of a rocky start with Max, though that’s all in the past now, as far as El’s concerned.

Hell, she doesn’t even have either of their numbers in her phone yet, so it’s still early days. But she likes both of them. Dustin is funny and sweet and really her first friend at Hawkins. And Max is both sharp as a tack and delightful, from what she’s been able to pick up so far.

El’s just really meeting Lucas and Will for the first time, but she likes them, too. She’s still smiling, at least on the inside, over the little rap sing-along battle between her and Lucas, who seems like the most grounded of the close-knit friends group. And Will is sweet and welcoming; he’d gone out of his way to make sure to include her during lunch. And, despite El being good at looking out for herself in that capacity, it’s still nice to have someone so invested in making her feel like part of the conversation.

But what sticks out the most about Mike and his friends is just the sheer depth of the friendships between them. They’re closer than friends – they’re practically family – and that comes across in every teasing jibe, every in-joke or shorthand reference, every silent conversation shared by a simple meeting of gazes.

El envies them. It’s the kind of closeness she’s always wanted to have with friends before, the kind she’s never been able to find. And, though she’s envious, she’s glad it at least exists out there in the world – gives her hope that she’ll find her place someday.

And yet, at the same time, El can’t get over the niggling thought that sitting there with Mike and his friends, eating lunch out under the sunshine, being part of their conversations and laughing and having a good time, is exactly where she’s meant to be. It’s like she’s known these people her entire life, even though she really just meeting them for the first time. El’s never felt déjà vu as strong as this before and it’s almost too much.

It also makes her want to figure out a way to eat lunch with them tomorrow, even though she promised Jen and Stacey she’d eat with them after begging off earlier today to go have a quiet, solo lunch on her own outside (that didn’t turn out quiet or solo – not that El’s complaining at all).

Hmm, maybe I’ll at least stop by their table and say hi, then. That’d be nice, El thinks, a smile curling up her lips, as she swings her backpack onto her shoulders and closes her locker door –

Only to, once again, find Zach Mercer standing on the other side of it, like he gets off on scaring the hell out of unsuspecting girls by lurking behind open locker doors. No, that’s not stalkish, not at all.

El sucks in a deep breath, a strangled gasp, and resists the urge to press her hand over her heart, which has leapt up into her throat with surprise. “What are you doing here?” El asks – no preamble, no waiting to hear whatever sleezy-ass greeting he has for her. She’s only “known” Zach for 4 days and she’s already done with him.

A slick smile crosses over Zach’s face and El feels her stomach turn. Sure, most people would probably look at that smile and see charming and handsome. But El can see the truth beneath the lie and she’s not falling for it. “Ah, babe, you’re breaking my heart! You know why I’m here.”
El rolls her eyes and turns on her heel to begin walking away. “And you know I’m not interested.”

“Oh, c’mon,” Zach says and El hears his footsteps come up alongside her. “That’s not true and we both know it. How could you resist this?”

Taken aback, nose crinkling with disgust, El glances over at Zach to see him gesturing to himself like he’s showing off a prize-winning sculpture or something. “Oh, with ease,” El doesn’t hesitate to say. “Won’t even break a sweat doing it.”

“Hey, there are good ways to work up a sweat, if you know what I mean,” Zach says, eyebrows wagging with blatant innuendo.

“And you will never experience them with me,” El shoots back. “Look, don’t get me wrong, I’m… well, I’m not flattered, but I at least acknowledge that you’re interested in me and, for some reason, think I’m interested back. But I’m not. You are literally not my type,” El says. “So, if you could leave me alone, I would really appreciate it.”

“Wow, you’re really committed to playing hard-to-get, aren’t you?” Zach says and there’s a hard edge in his voice that has El’s hackles immediately rising along the back of her neck.

“Not playing,” El says, her voice low and serious. “I have nothing against you, but I’m honestly not interested and I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

El goes to walk faster, to speed up to push past Zach so she can go meet up with her dad, but before she can, Zach takes a few fast steps to pass and shoots his arm out in front of her, his palm resting flat against the wall. He boxes her in, getting way too close, and El’s heart leaps up into her throat, fear sizzling a numbing path down her spine. “Not so fast, sweetheart,” Zach says, his voice hushed. El risks a glance up at him and realizes, with him so close, just how much bigger he is than her. El knows she can deal with someone his size, but there’s that primal part of her that instinctually shies away from the physical threat he represents. “I’ll have you know that I’m giving you an opportunity every girl in this school would be eager to accept. And you don’t want to have that kind of regret in your life, do you?”

El looks up into his face, brave in the face of the adrenaline that races through her veins, and feels her spine harden as anger swells inside of her. Zach’s looking down at her like she’s an object for him to possess, less than human, something he deserves, something he’s entitled to.

Even though it makes El want to be ill, she refuses to look away, refusing to be intimidated by this walking shitstain. Guys like this, if they don’t get off at girls falling at their feet, get off on taking what they want by force and El’s not going to give him the satisfaction of seeing her falter. “Well, then, I guess I’ll just have to learn to live with that regret,” she says as she takes a large step backwards through the space behind her where Zach’s failed to block. She sidesteps him quickly, getting out his reach as fast as possible. “And if you ever harass me again, I’ll chop off your balls and report you to the police, you got that?”

And, with that, not waiting to see what Zach’s reaction is, El begins walking down the hall and away from him. Behind her, she can vaguely hear him calling out – “Aww, come on babe, we were just having a friendly conversation. No need to be a bitch about it!” – but El barely hears him. Adrenaline, from both anger and fear, has the blood roaring in her ears.

She feels almost numb, emotions warring inside of her, and doesn’t realize she’s all but steamrolling her way down the hall towards the entrance until she slips past a group of students loitering in the middle of the hallway –
‘– and barrels straight into Max, who’s just finishing closing up her locker.

They collide in a heap of limbs and school supplies, and the only reason they both don’t fall to the
ground is they both reach for the other, hands grabbing arms and pulling. It counteracts the force
hurting them towards the floor, and there’s a bit more flailing, arms outstretched to regain balance,
before they both stand steady.

‘Hey, watch –!’ is what Max starts to say at the same time as a startled yelp escapes from El’s lips.
But the two lock eyes a second later, quickly recognizing the other, and Max’s outburst dies down as
quickly as it flares up.

Instead, Max’s face calms down to a look of gentle admonishment, lips quirking in a small smile.
‘Jeez, El. Maybe you should – ’ In an instant, Max’s expression takes a turn for the concerned –
brow furrowing, lips turning down in a frown. ‘El? What’s wrong?’

El isn’t sure exactly what’s showing in her face – anger, disgust, fear, some horrible amalgamation of
all of them – but if El can guess anything at all about Max, is that she’s not going to let this go. Guess
the jig is up… if it was ever there in the first place. “Nothing, nothing really,” El says, trying to
downplay this as much as she can. It bothers her that she’s so, well, bothered by this. Logically, she
knows she’s allowed to be, but emotionally, she feels like she should be able to shrug this off. “It’s
just… Zach Mercer cornered me in the hallway a few minutes ago and….” She trails off, a shudder
running down her spine. “Ugh, I don’t even want to give him the satisfaction of knowing he got to
me. He’s such an asshole.”

Max’s jaw drops. “Are you fucking serious?” she asks. She reaches for El, but appears to reconsider,
her hand hovering somewhere near El’s elbow without actually touching her. “Are you gonna do
something about it?”

El shrugs. “Not right now. I told him if he ever did that to me again, that I’d cut off his balls and
report him to the cops. But, for the moment, I just kinda want to forget it ever happened, to be
honest.”

Max’s face flushes with anger, her lips pursed, and she looks like she wants to run through the halls,
find Zach Mercer, and pound him into the ground herself. But she stays still, fists clenched at her
side, and when she exhales, her shoulders relax and El knows the moment has passed. ‘Are you
gonna be ok?’ Max asks. Her voice is still tight, thrumming with barely contained anger, but there’s
an undercurrent of concern that is one of the more heart-warming things El’s ever felt. Whenever shit
goes down, you can always count on other girls.

El smiles, and if it feels a little shaky, neither of them say anything. “Yeah, I’ll be fine. I’m heading
to the police station to go wait for my dad, so I’ll be good there.”

Max quirks an eyebrow, turning her torso a bit to gesture to the entrance doors behind her. “You
want a ride? I drove into school today.”

El pauses, considering. On the one hand, the walk from here to the police station would be perfect
for helping to clear her head, to settle her unsettled nerves. But, if Zach should happen to come
across her in his car while she’s walking….

A shudder runs through her and all El knows is that she doesn’t want that to happen – not today. “If
you don’t mind, that’d be great. But, um, you can just drop me off at the corner of Main Street. I
don’t mind walking the rest of the way.” And she really doesn’t – the walk does sound nice. And she
doesn’t want Max to have to go out of her way if she doesn’t have to.
But, given the look on Max’s face, that won’t be either an option or a problem. “Yeah, no, if I’m going to give you a ride, I’m going to get you all the way to your destination. C’mon,” Max says with a jerk of her head. “Let’s go, princess.”

El levels a look over at Max from under a furrowed brow. “Don’t call me ‘princess’,” El says, voice flat. But, inside, she’s secretly a little amused that Max finds her worthy enough to give a nickname to.

“My car, my rules,” Max says with a grin as they start walking towards the entrance doors. “And my rules say passengers will accept any and all nicknames I give them.”

“Ugh, fine,” El says with a faux, over-dramatic sigh. But she still feels the beginnings of a smile creeping up onto her lips. In the face of Max’s blunt warmth and concern, it’s hard to let affects of her interaction with Zach linger for too long. “As long as I get to give you a nickname in return.”

The sunshine is bright and warm as they step outside. “Well, then, hit me with it,” Max says, lips fully curled up in a teasing grin that is affectionately mocking.

“I’m thinkin’ about it, I’m thinkin’ about it,” El says, eyes narrowed in a playful glare. “Don’t rush me. You can’t hurry genius, you know.”

Max snorts as she leads El to a beat-up 4-door sedan that must have rolled off the assembly line before either of them were born. It looks like the kind of car held together by duct tape and a prayer, the kind of clunker that is all too typical of a teenager’s first car. “Oh, is that what’s going on in your head?” Max asks, humor lilting her voice. “And ignore the crappy car. My step-dad wouldn’t pitch in for anything better.”

“Hey, at least you have a car,” El says as she waits for Max to unlock the doors before opening the door to the passenger seat, sliding her backpack off one shoulder so she can hold it in her lap. “Hell, I don’t even have a license.”

“Well, wouldn’t imagine you’d need one in New York,” Max says as they both close the doors behind them. “Bet the subway was all you needed.”

El purses her lips as she considers Max’s point. “Hmm, true, but moving to Indiana has me seriously looking at pushing my dad to teach me how to drive.”

Max starts the car and any response she had to El’s words gets swallowed as the sound system starts blaring, Green Day’s “American Idiot” roaring out of the speakers at a near deafening volume. El jumps, startled by how loud it is, and Max rushes to turn down the volume. “Shit, sorry,” Max swears once it’s quiet enough so she can be heard. The music is still loud, but at least El can hear both Max’s voice and herself think.

“Don’t worry about it,” El says with a laugh. “It’s a good song.”

“Yeah, but not if it makes your eardrums bleed from the decibel level,” Max says while the two of them buckle up. “But, at least you have good taste in music.”

El laughs. “Who doesn’t like Green Day?”

Max throws her a look from the driver’s seat before she looks behind her to back out of the parking spot she’s in. “In this town? You’d be surprised.”

El quirks a grin, thinking back to the music she’s predominantly heard wafting out of open windows and open truck cabs. “A little more country, a little less rock ‘n roll?”
“Precisely,” Max says with a chuckle. “So, speaking of music, what are you into? Besides 90s rap and punk, that is.”

The ride to the police station is short, but El learns that Max likes punk and synthwave, while El relays her love for 80s hair bands and 90s alternative. They laugh as they swap favorite songs, trade disdain for autotune, and wonder what the hell is up with the K-Pop phenomenon while admitting that a lot of those songs are catchy as fuck.

Max pulls up into one of the spots in front of the station, but she doesn’t kill the engine. “Well, here you go, the Hawkins Police Station. The effective police enterprise that criminals quake in fear of.”

El sticks out her tongue. “You do realize that my dad’s in charge of this place, yeah?” she says as she unbuckles her seatbelt and opens the passenger door.

“Why do you think I said it?” Max says with a smirk. “See you tomorrow, then?”

El nods as she prepares to slide out of the car. “Yeah, I promised Jen and Stacey that I’d eat lunch with them, but maybe I’ll stop by your guys’ table to say hi, or something. It was nice, having lunch with you guys today.”

Max smiles, nodding as her fingers tap absently on the steering wheel. “Yeah, I agree. We should definitely do it again sometime.”

“Next week, for sure,” El says. “Bye, Max. Thanks for the ride.”

“Anytime,” Max says. “Anyone who can put up being bothered by the douchebag Zach Mercer has automatic ride privileges.”

El heaves a groaning sigh. “God, he’s such a douche canoe,” she says, emphasizing her point with a scoff.

“So, I take it you don’t like him, then?” Max asks. The question is teasing, rhetorical even, but El can hear a hint of actual curiosity in Max’s voice, like she thinks it might be possible that El actually might like that modern day caveman.

“Ugh, fuck no,” El says. “He’s gross and entitled and slimy and disgusting. I wouldn’t go out with him if you paid me all the money in the world. He is so not my type.”

Max quirks an eyebrow. “And your type is…?”

“The complete and utter opposite,” El finishes for her, trying so hard not to picture Mike and failing miserably – god, she’s completely gone, isn’t she?. “And, on that note, I will see you tomorrow. Bye, Max.”

Max laughs. “Bye, El.”

El gets out of the car, shuts the door behind her, and gives Max a wave as one final farewell before she turns to head into the police station.

Whatever lingering effects of her encounter with Zach completely disappear as she walks through the glass doors into the station. He can’t hurt her here, can’t even get to her here and El feels herself relaxing completely as she walks up to Flo’s desk, a smile on her face. “Hey, Flo,” she says as she gets close enough. “My dad in?”

“Yeah, he’s here. How was school today?” Flo asks, folding her arms in front of her, a kind smile on
her round face.

El shrugs, but she’s grinning regardless. “Oh, you know, made new friends, sat through some classes, told a boy to fuck off – you know, the usual.”

Flo raises an eyebrow, silently chiding El about her language, but says nothing more on it. “Well, sounds productive. I’m sure your father would approve.”

“Yes, probably,” El says. “Well, I’m gonna go say hi then hunker down in the back to do some homework.”

“Sounds good, hon,” Flo says. “Let me know if you need anything.”

“Will do. Thanks, Flo!” El says, trilling her fingers at the older woman before going off in search of Hop.

Hop’s in his office, but he’s on the phone, so El only sticks her head in enough to catch his eye and wave at him, waiting for him to acknowledge her existence, before she heads off to the bullpen. There’s an empty desk in the back that she’s been using for the past few days and, already, some of her detritus is starting to collect there – a hair tie, a couple of pens, leftover sandwich bag that had the carrot sticks she ate as a snack yesterday. Part of her’s hoping that the desk stays empty throughout the rest of her high school career so she can have somewhere to call her own in one of the places she feels at home in.

Plus, the desk is right next to Steve Harrington’s, so she’s usually guaranteed to have some sort of company.

El likes Steve. He’s nice, he doesn’t treat her like a kid, and he doesn’t also ogle her like some guys fresh out of college do. *Doesn’t hurt that he’s also incredibly cute,* El says. And just because Steve may not be her type (on top of being too old for her) doesn’t mean that she can’t appreciate the view, now does it?

Steve’s at his desk when El heads over, sprawled out in his chair with his hands on his computer’s keyboard, face staring blankly ahead at the screen. “Hi, Steve,” El says as she gets closer. “Riveting stuff?”

Steve blinks, like he’s waking up out of a stupor, and shakes his head a bit to clear the cobwebs before he looks up at her. “Ellie! Back at your usual time, I see. You’re starting to become a regular around here, you know.”

El shrugs as she drops her backpack and sits at the empty desk. “Probably won’t always be like this, not if I get onto Pep Squad.”

“Eh, you’ll make it. They’d be stupid not to let you on the squad,” Steve says.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” El says with a grin. “Now, if only you were one of the judges for tryouts…..”

Steve snorts. “Yeah, you couldn’t pay me to step foot back on that campus for anything other than official police business. My high school days are long behind me and with good riddance.” He pauses, giving El a curious look. “So, how was school today?”

El shrugs, much like she did with Flo earlier. “Eh, you know how it goes. But I did get to threaten a guy with chopping off his balls, so not bad.”
Steve cringes. “Ouch, what’d he do to deserve that?”

“Harassed me in the hallway,” El says, not sugar-coating it. She’s finding that, with a little bit of
distance plus being safe in the police station, it’s easier to talk about. “So I told him to fuck off and if
he ever did it again, that I’d do the aforementioned ball chopping and then report him to the police.”
El finishes her short-version story with a perky smile, amused at how Steve looks simultaneously
proud, alarmed, and queasy.

“Fuck, seriously?” he says. “You ok? Want me to come down at put the fear of the law into this
guy?”

The immediate rush with assistance makes El feel warm inside and she’s marvels at the lack of
hesitancy on Steve’s part. Especially because he’s the kind of guy who probably acted at least a little
like guys like Zach in high school. “Wow, you always willing to come to a teenager’s defense like
this?”

Steve grins. “It’s why I’m a cop in the first place, El. Girl I was dating in high school, her kid brother
and his friends were being harassed by a high school guy, so I stepped in to defend them. Ended up
looking out for them during the rest of high school and, well, when it came time to figure out what
the fuck I was gonna do with my life, I realized the only thing I was good was was protecting
people, so….” Steve trails off, shrugging, before he crosses his arms over his chest with a self-
satisfied smile. “Here I am, a willing and able knight who legally has a gun and the power to arrest
people.”

El lets out a laugh, touched by his concern and thankful for guys like Steve out there in the universe.
“Well, thank you. But I think I can take care of myself.”

“But, if you can’t….”

“If I can’t, you and my dad will be the first people I call,” El says, rolling her eyes, even as she’s
smiling. “Anyway, I should probably do my homework and you should probably get back to what
looks like very exciting paperwork.”

Steve glances over at his computer screen and groans. “Great, thanks for reminding me.”

“Happy to help, anytime. As long as my help doesn’t involve doing your paperwork for you,” El
says, cutting off the dawning look of hope on Steve’s face before it can blossom into a full idea.

Steve pouts. “Way to ruin all my fun,” he says, grumbling, but he turns back to his computer and, for
a couple of hours, there’s just the two of them in the back of the police station, each doing their
work. The sounds of the station exist as comforting background noise – phones ringing, file cabinets
opening and closing, the low rumble of conversation between the other cops – and El lets it help her
concentrate as she works through her homework one subject at a time, getting the easy stuff out of
the way first and saving the harder stuff for when she’s at home.

In fact, she’s so into what she’s doing, having tuned out almost everything else, that it comes as a
complete and utter surprise when she hears her dad’s voice behind her. “El, honey, time to get
going.”

El jumps, pulse pounding furiously in her veins, and she presses her hand to her chest as she turns to
look at her dad. “Geez, Dad, give a girl a warning next time.”

Hop smirks down at her. “Hey, not my fault you have tunnel vision. Learn some situational
awareness, please.”
“But, Dad, you know how I get in the zone when I’m concentrating,” El says, returning his look with a flat stare of her own.

“Ok, Zone Girl, if you say so. Pack up your stuff and let’s get going,” Hop says as he stands there, thumbs hooked in his belt loops, rocking back and forth between the balls of his feet and his heels.

“Hey, can we stop somewhere to pick up a few things on our way home?” El asks as she gathers her things and puts them away in her backpack. “I need film for the camera for Photography and I think we’re almost out of ziploc bags.”

Hop lets out a sighing breath, but he nods. “Yeah, I could use a few things, too. C’mon, there’s a general store around the corner. Let’s make it quick – we still need to figure out dinner.”

“You say that like you don’t know we’re just going to end up eating frozen pizza and salad tonight. Because we both know you don’t cook,” El says with a playful grumble as she zips up her backpack.

Hop reaches for her bag before El can shoulder it, though, swinging it easily up onto one shoulder. “Damn, kid, you just went straight for the jugular, didn’t you?”

“Hey, if I did, it’s because it’s what you taught me,” El says, smirking as they begin to make their way out of the station.

“Yeah, yeah,” Hop says in the way that he knows she’s right, but doesn’t want to admit it. “Let’s just grab the things we need and go home.”

They stop to drop El’s stuff off in the police cruiser before Hop leads her around the corner, just like he said, to a large general store that takes up most of the block. The sign above the awning reads “Melvald’s”, the same name that’s professionally etched in the glass of the entrance double doors.

And, it is indeed a general store, El realizes as she follows her dad in through the doors, looking around while he grabs a basket. It seems like there’s a little bit of everything – kitchen goods, homegoods, a pharmacy tucked in the back corner, gifts, and other various knicknacks. The beginnings of a Halloween display are being set up in front of the store, a poor store employee almost entirely shrouded in costumes in plastic bags and boxes of spooky decorations.

“C’mon, let’s hurry this up,” Hop says as he gestures towards the aisles. “I’m getting hungry.”

El smirks up at her dad. “You know, if you would just eat the lunch I pack for you, you wouldn’t be starving by the time dinner came around.”

“Well, if you packed, oh I don’t know, real people food, I’d eat the lunch you pack me,” Hopper shoots back, returning her smirk with a near identical one of his own.

“Ugh, Dad, a ham and cheese sandwich and an apple are real people food,” El groans, shoulders slumping as she shuffles her feet along side him in overwrought angst.

“Not when you use that whole grain bread bullshit, it’s not,” Hop says, reaching for her to pull her along. “Now, come on, Ellie Bear, grab your stuff so we can get the hell home.”

El wrinkles her nose as they head to the camera and film section of the store. “Don’t call me Ellie Bear,” she grumbles, but otherwise does what her dad asks of her.

It doesn’t take them long to grab the things they need – the film and ziploc bags El needed; shaving cream, a couple of packs of AA batteries, and a pack of pens for Hop – and then they’re heading to
the register.

There’s someone at the counter now – probably the same store employee who was buried in Halloween supplies – and she’s sorting through a counter display of more Halloween stuff. Hop places the basket down near the register, eyes scanning over the display of magazines to the left of the counter.

“Gimme just one second,” the woman says, one hand coming up to push dark hair out of her eyes, looking like she’s trying to focus on counting the trinkets in front of her.

If El hadn’t been looking up at her dad at this exact moment, she never would have believed what she’s seeing right now. At the sound of the woman’s voice, Hop goes almost pale, the kind of pale that has El worrying that he’s going to pass out, and his shoulders tense up, back going ramrod straight. He turns to look at the woman so fast, El wouldn’t be surprised if he has whiplash. And then he speaks, his voice coming out from his mouth in an uncharacteristic hush. “Joyce?”

The woman – Joyce, El presumes – freezes, hands stilling above the things she’s sorting through. She looks up a moment later, brown eyes wide, lips parted in a soft “oh”. She’s a pretty woman, El notices, if a little harried looking, like she’s used to working long shifts without much sleep. But her hair is dark, coming down to a few inches below her shoulders, thick with barely any gray in sight, and her cheeks are flushed a light, pretty pink color. “Jim? Jim Hopper?” The shock begins to fade, lips pulling up into a surprised smile.

El looks up at her dad, gaze expectant, and has to suppress the grin that threatens to break out on her face at the almost shy smile that Hop gives back. “The one and only,” Hop says, his voice having gone soft and fond in a way that is reminiscent of how he sometimes talks to El when they’re having a quiet bonding moment.

“I’d heard you moved back, but I didn’t-” Joyce starts, mouth working a couple of times without sound, like she’s still processing. Almost like an instinct, El glances down at Joyce’s left hand, searching for a wedding ring. But there’s nothing circling her ring finger, not even a hint of a tan. Could be she doesn’t wear a ring, but… with the way she’s looking at Dad? Married is unlikely. “So, um, how’ve you been? Settling back in well?”

“Yes, um, yeah, not so bad,” Hop says, almost tripping over his tongue. “Just… picking up a few things for home with my daughter.” He pauses, like he’s just remembered El even exists. “Oh, um, Joyce, this is my daughter, El. El, this is Joyce, an old friend from high school.”

“That’s one way of putting it,” Joyce says with a fond grin before she reaches forward to hold out her hand. “It’s nice to meet you, El.”

El takes Joyce’s hand, exchanging a handshake. “It’s nice to meet you too….”

“You can just call me Joyce,” the older woman says. “No need to stand on formalities, not among old friends.”

“Ok, ‘Joyce’ it is, then,” El says. “And it’s nice to meet a friend of my dad’s. I’m sure you have a lot of embarrassing stories of him from when he was a kid.”

“A wry grin pulls up at the corners of Joyce’s lips. “Oh, do I ever. You’re father was quite the troublemaker when he was your age, you know.”

Hop lets out a groan. “Ok, Joyce, no need to go turning my kid against me.”

“You say that like it hasn’t happened already,” El says, one eyebrow quirked as humor bubbles up
inside of her. “I am your daughter, or did you forget?”

Hop sighs heavily, but Joyce laughs like this is one of the best things that she’s ever seen. “Well, she certainly is your daughter, isn’t she?”

“Just ring us up, please,” Hop grumbles, but El can see the beginnings of a smile growing beneath the hair of his goatee and, from the look on Joyce’s face, the other woman can see it too.

Well, isn’t this interesting.

There’s a bit of silence as Joyce rings up the items in their basket and it’s as Hop’s handing over his card for Joyce to swipe it that he speaks again. “So, uh, how’ve things been with you? You and Lonnie still…?”

Joyce lets out a sharp laugh. “No, oh no. Not for a while, not since-” She stops herself mid-sentence with a shake of her head. “You know what? It’s not important. Suffice it to say, it’s been a while.”

“Oh, well, um, I’m sorry to hear that,” Hopper says and El nearly chokes on the air around her, it’s suddenly so awkward.

“I’m not,” Joyce says as she bags up their things. “Worked out for the best.”

Hop lets out a cough. “Well, then, good. That’s good.”

Joyce hands over the bag to Hop and El tries to see if their hands touch, but no such luck. “So, um, since you’re back in town and all, maybe we should catch up sometime. You know, for old time’s sake.”

Hop pauses, fingers wrapping around the plastic handles of the bag, but not pulling away quite yet. “Yeah,” he says, voice rough. He pauses, clearing it, before continuing. “Yeah, that sounds good. We’ll, uh, we’ll figure it out. Soon.”

“Sounds good,” Joyce echoes.

Hop gives Joyce a smile, one that she returns, much to El’s amusement. “Well, um, we should be getting home. Got dinner to get together and everything.”

“Oh, yes, of course. Gotta make sure your kid’s fed and everything,” Joyce says, a blush crawling up her cheeks, like she forgot that Hopper might have had somewhere else to be. “It was nice seeing you again, Hop. Hopefully it won’t be 18 years until the next time I see you.”

“Count on it,” Hop says, a fond smile stretching his lips. “Catch you later, Joyce.”

“Bye, Hop,” Joyce says.

“It was nice meeting you, Joyce,” El says as she waves at the older woman. She notices that Hop does the same, only much more awkwardly, the motion of his hand a little jerky, like he’s out of practice in waving at someone.

Joyce waves back at them, smiling brightly, eyes crinkling at the corners, and that’s the last El sees of Joyce as she and Hop turn towards the door.

The bell jingles as Hop pushes open the door, El following behind, and if El notices her dad seems a little (or a lot) unsettled, she doesn’t say anything.

At least, not at first.
El holds her tongue until she and Hop are climbing into his police cruiser and it’s only when they’re buckling their seat belts that she can’t hold it in anymore. “So, Joyce seems nice,” El says, a lilting, knowing tone in her voice. “Seems like you two have quite the history.” El can’t help the grin that stretches over her face and, when Hop looks over at her, brows flat over an inscrutable gaze, she loses the battle against the giggles that have been building up inside of her for the past 5 minutes.

“Oh, shut it, kid,” Hop grumbles as he starts the engine and backs out of his parking spot in front of the police station.

Wisely, El does, knowing not to push him too hard.

But, if there’s one thing El Hopper definitely got from her dad, is her stubbornness.

And this thing with Joyce? Well, there’s no way in hell El’s letting this go.

Not by a long shot.

Chapter End Notes

So, whaddya think? We’ve taken a small detour for some Jopper, so expect more of that in the next chapter. And, maybe, just maybe Mike’s going to start coming around to the idea that El might be interested in him.

Or will he????

I’m gonna try my best to get the next chapter out before the season premiers. But, in the meantime, if any of y’all wanna come and flail with me over mileven and the excitement over Stranger Things in general, please come hit me up on tumblr! I go by the same username there (@fatechica), so please come bug me! I love talking with people about Stranger Things and ESPECIALLY MILEVEN!
catching up and getting caught up with you

Chapter Notes

So, ok, like, first off, a general question for y'all:

Are we all ok after s3? I'm just checking in because I'm concerned about everyone and want to make sure we're all still breathing after that whirlwind of a season.

All still breathing? Still alive? GOOD.

So, this chapter feels, well, *ironically timed*, given where things ended up with Hopper. But, yeah, prepare for a whole side thing with Jopper up ahead, yeah?

(And, don't worry, there's at least a little mileven in here. can't forget my brand, after all!)

So, enjoy everyone and tell me what you think!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hopper can’t stop thinking about his encounter with Joyce.

Or, at least, El’s *pretty sure* he can’t. Her dad’s been out of sorts since Thursday evening and meeting Joyce is literally the only thing noteworthy that’s happened.

It wasn’t super obvious on Friday morning, Hop being out of sorts. He’d been ok at breakfast – a little gruff, but nothing out of the ordinary – and El hadn’t given it a second thought as she finished up some last minute reading for her English class.

By the time she got to school, the minor weirdness had been completely forgotten as El shifted her focus to what was *really* important: paying attention in class and flirting with Mike.

Said flirting had gone *fantastically, thank you very much*. Light-hearted and rich with more than just a little heat, gazes meeting across the scant distances that had separated them in class, the gentle brushing of their fingers as she passed over a pencil for him to borrow, both of them blushing at the contact….

*God,* it’d been delicious, leaving her feeling dizzy, heart pounding in her chest as something akin to *want* floated through her veins like warm honey.

El’d even managed to continue the flirting when she stopped by the table Mike sat at with his friends during lunch on her way out of the cafeteria, exchanging pleasant, if nerdy small talk with them while glancing slyly at Mike out of the corner of her eye. He’d met her gaze right back, like he was already looking at her, and El couldn’t stop her stomach from swooping as a million butterflies took flight beneath her skin.

She’d left minutes later, but not without touching him briefly on the shoulder in brief farewell, just barely holding herself back from giving the curve of his upper arm a squeeze. It was a near thing, given how warm and firm he was beneath her touch and how much her heart raced and skin tingled in the process. *God,* she just wanted to lean into it and *never let go.*
So when El gets home on Friday night, she’s riding the high of an amazing day at school and the fact that it’s the weekend – all in all, too euphoric to pay attention to how her dad’s quieter than usual. It does hit her though, during dinner that night – the two of them sitting at the kitchen table sharing a meal of spaghetti with sauce that came out of a jar – that Hop’s sitting next to her just... staring out into space.

El’s brow furrows at the sight. Normally, dinner’s their time to catch each other up about their day, the conversation bright and filled with quips and jabs and teasing remarks. But now her dad’s quiet in a way that is just weird.

El slows down her fork where she’s twirling it in her spaghetti and quirks an eyebrow. “Dad? Everything ok?”

Hop blinks, like she startled him out a reverie, and he looks over at her, mirroring her quirked eyebrow. “Yeah, honey, everything’s fine. Why?”

“Just...you’ve been really quiet,” El says, lips pursed. “You didn’t even tease me when I said I was thinking about going to check out the comic book store downtown.”

Hopper’s mouth twitches with a grin. “My daughter, the nerd.” It’s the type of teasing El expects from her dad, but it’s half-assed, like his heart isn’t fully in it. Like he’s distracted.

El levels a look at her dad regardless, though. “Oh, haha. Yes, like you haven’t called me that before.” She sets her fork down. “And I’m serious. You’ve been weird since last night. Everything ok? Is it the woman we met at the store yesterday?”

The reaction from Hopper is immediate. “No. What? No.” He drops his fork, a nervous laugh escaping him as he reaches for his beer. “Why would I be weird after running into Joyce? That’s just... weird. And Joyce isn’t weird. It’s normal to run into old friends in the town I grew up in. Nope, not weird.”

El bites the inside of her cheek to keep from smiling. “Dad, you just said ‘weird’ 4 times.”

“Oh, I did?” Hop says, voice sounding a little strangled. “That’s wei – I mean, um, that’s strange.”

El loses the battle to keep the smile off her face and she feels her lips curl up in a fond, if teasing smile. “Dad, did something happen between you and Joyce?” El pauses, gasping. “Oh my god, did you two used to go out?”

“Ok, you can quit it right now, Nancy Drew,” Hop says, trying to look stern. But there’s a bit of panic behind the fatherly chiding and El’s almost positive she’s caught her dad out.

But, she recognizes when it’s not a good time to push and right now is one of those times. “Ok, ok, sorry,” El says, holding up a placating hand. “I was just curious, is all. She seems nice, though. You two going to catch up sometime, like you said?”

Hop shrugs. “I don’t know, maybe. Probably,” he says as he grabs his fork and digs back into his pasta. “We’ll see.”

El does the same, continuing to twirl a mouthful of noodles on to her fork. “Well, you should. It’d be nice to see what your friend’s been up to since you’ve been gone. I bet you missed out on a lot.”

Hopper sighs, panic seeming to fade a little as a wistful sort of sadness settles into its place. “Yeah, bet I did,” he says. He signs once more before he blinks, like he’s clearing his thoughts, and looks over at her. “So, what’s this about the comic book store? Are you sure you wanna out yourself as a
“Very funny, Dad,” El says with a sigh full of teenage angst, her dad’s weirdness shoved aside as they fully engage in their normal dinner time routine.

But El doesn’t forget it, not as she clears the table and does the dishes as part of her chores; not as she goes upstairs to read or watch TV or play video games; not as she gets ready for bed way later that night.

What happened between Hopper and Joyce? From what El can tell, it seems like they were at least friends back during their school days. Did they like each other? Was it unrequited or mutual pining or just bad timing? Or did they actually end up dating and it went horribly bad and now they’re filled with regret and longing?

These questions swirl in El’s mind, even when she’s finally trying to drift off to sleep. But, she’s too much like her dad: get an unsolved mystery in front of her and she’s like a pitbull on a pant leg. She just wants to know what happened… and how to make things better.

Or, at least, make her dad happy.

As far as El knows, Hop hasn’t even so much thought about going out on a date since her mom left. Instead, he buried himself in work and tried to be the best dad he could when he was home to a 12 year-old daughter who was missing her mom and couldn’t understand why she was gone.

But El’s 16 now, not 12. She’s older, wiser, and the sting of her mom’s leaving has lessened over time. And Hop deserves to be happy again, deserves to have someone in his life who cares about him like a significant other.

He deserves to not to be lonely anymore.

Oh, sure, El knows that Hop has her and that he hasn’t been by himself. But it’s different having your kid with you versus having a romantic partner with you. And El’s going to be going off to college in a couple of years which would leave her dad absolutely by himself and the thought of that makes her heart squeeze painfully in her chest.

No, if there’s something El can do to make sure that her dad has someone to look out for him when she’s not here anymore, well, then, El’s going to make sure she does that. Even if it’s giving Hop a nudge in the direction of what seems to be an old flame, if the flustered interaction El witnessed at Melvald’s is any indication.

Providence weirdly seems to be on her side, then, when she wakes up Saturday morning to discover that it’s that time of the month… and she’s nearly out of tampons.

Well, fuck me, El thinks with a frustrated grimace as she checks the small box she keeps in the cabinet under the sink. She only has, like, 2 left in the box and that’s not enough to get her through the day, much less through the end of her period.

But, despite the mild cramps that frustratingly twist at her insides, El has to smile. Because now she has an excuse to go back to Melvald’s. An excuse her dad has respond to.

So El trudges downstairs, still in her PJs, mostly empty tampon box in hand. Her dad’s sitting in the kitchen on this lazy Saturday morning, newspaper open in front of him as he leisurely drinks what El figures is probably his second cup of coffee for the day.

Hop looks up at the sound of El’s footsteps walking into the kitchen and a smile crosses his face.
“Morning, sweetheart. How’re you doing?”

El shrugs. “Eh, ok. But we need to go back to the store sometime today.” The expression on Hop’s face starts to shift to one of suspicion, but that gets cut off as soon as El holds up the box of tampons and gives it a shake, the hollow rattling sound emphasizing the direness of the situation. “I’m almost out and, well, there’s a need.” El’s long since gotten over being embarrassed about her period around her dad. Her mom had been gone for almost a year when she started getting her period, so it’d been her dad or no one at the time. It wasn’t exactly a comfortable topic for the two of them, but necessity makes for strange bedfellows and they put up with it with their usual bull-headed stubbornness.

It’s that same stubbornness that keeps Hop from grimacing, that keeps his face neutral. But, even still, El can see the glimmer of suspicion, of disbelief in his gaze, all “well isn’t this convenient”. “Ok, we’ll head over around lunchtime. Sound good?”

El grins. “Can we go to that bakery nearby, too? I also have a need for cake.”

Hop breathes out a laugh, lips pulled up in the beginnings of a fond smile. “Yeah, ok. Anything to soothe those hormones, I suppose.”

“Thank you!” El says as she sets the tampon box down on the table and moves to start getting something resembling breakfast together.

“Hey, don’t leave that on the table!” Hop barks out, though, before El can get too far into figuring out what to eat.

“Oops, sorry,” El says, feeling a little sheepish, before she grabs the box to put it back in her bathroom.

The rest of the morning passes just fine – El eats breakfast and takes some Advil before she curls up on the couch with a heated pad and a book; Hop goes to sort through some boxes in the garage – and, around lunchtime, the two of them pile into the car and head for downtown Hawkins.

And, as Hop drives, El stares out the window and hopes that Joyce will be there at Melvald’s when they get there.

God, Jim hopes Joyce won’t be at Melvald’s when they get there. Just the thought of maybe running into her again gives him cold sweats. His hands feel clammy where he’s gripping the steering wheel and his heart is beating faster than the drum line in a marching band.

Fuck, he’s too old for this. Too old to be feeling like a teenager on his first date, too old to handle the way his body reacts at things like “attraction” and “longing”.

Running into Joyce again that night at Melvald’s as he and El were on their way home felt like a punch to the gut. Logically, when he’d decided to move him and El to the town he grew up in, he knew that he’d probably see Joyce sooner rather than later. Hawkins isn’t that big of a town and there aren’t many places to hide. But he’d figured he’d be fine. It’d been years, after all – years and a kid and an ex-wife between what he’d had with Joyce back in high school and now. Surely, all those feelings would have faded into something wistful and nostalgic.

But that was before he saw her again.
That was before he found out she’s still so fucking beautiful, even more than he remembers her being back in high school.

She’s older than the last time they’d seen each other – but, then again, so is he. The image of her from a couple of days ago leaps into his mind’s eye. Dark circles under her eyes that speak to long nights and endless worry, hair that’s a bit more frazzled than the carefully coifed locks she’d had back in high school, nails short and lacking the wild colors she used to sport.

But, despite her harried appearance, Joyce is still so, so beautiful. Time has taken her sharp, pixie-like beauty and honed it into something fierce, something alluring. And her skin is still smooth, her smile sweet and knowing and coy and Jim isn’t entirely sure that there’s not a part of his heart that still isn’t in love with her.

The thought makes him not regretful, but wistful. He and Joyce had always been close growing up. They’d shared the same disdain for authority and the same skepticism that seemed to skip over most of their classmates. And when they got to high school, mutual attraction became part of that mix.

They’d never acted on it besides fooling around a few times (including one very memorable occasion in the bed of his dad’s truck that, suffice it to say, fueled many a fantasy for quite a number of years). And by the time he’d gotten around to getting his act together and screwing up the courage to ask her out, Joyce had already been swept up in Lonnie’s orbit and Jim was heartbroken.

He’d left Hawkins after graduation with the shadow of what could have been living between him and Joyce like an awkward and unwanted chaperone. And he’d been able to admit, even if only to himself, that part of the reason he left Hawkins was to get some space between him and the unrequited love he had for her.

New York had been so different from Hawkins, full of sights and sounds and people like nothing from the place he grew up. And with barely anything there to remind him of the girl who still held his heart, Jim had been able to start healing.

Jim had found not just his career in New York, something he was truly good at (though not after a bit of searching for what that career was supposed to be), but he’d found his ultimate purpose in life when he met Terry Ives and ended up with a beautiful baby girl.

It wasn’t meant to be with Terry – they’d been too different, him more grounded and her always searching for the next adventure with flights of fancy, all of that before she left him and El because of her deteriorating mental health that she didn’t want to saddle her daughter with having to witness – but he will always be thankful for meeting her and marrying her. Without that, he never would have gotten El and Jim honestly can’t imagine his life without her.

That’s why he can’t regret the way things ended up between him and Joyce, why he never plays the what-if game. Because if he’d never left town, partially to get away from Joyce, he’d have never met Terry and gotten El out of the deal. And he could never regret the bright, headstrong little girl who is the true love of his life.

Jim spares a glance over at the young woman sitting in the passenger seat, the young woman he’s so proud to call his daughter. El’s sitting there, gaze focused outside the window at the passing scenery, arms loosely wrapped around her lower midsection. That plus the way her skin is pinched around the edge of her jaw and the corner of her eye is the only sign that she’s in any kind of distress, that she’s not faking being on her period to get him to take her to Melvald’s.

But Jim honestly wouldn’t have put it past her, which says more about him as a father, really, than El as a daughter.
But Jim’s not blind and, besides, El tends to wear her motives openly. She’s been interested in his relationship with Joyce over the past couple of days, all sly comments and carefully worded questions, like she can trick him into revealing more than he’s ever planned on about his dating history. But it’s obvious she’s caught on that something happened and she isn’t about to let it go. Not when she’s mildly pushed and prodded him over the past few years for why he hasn’t tried dating again.

*My daughter, laughably transparent when she really wants something. Even if that something is juicy gossip about her father so she can play matchmaker.*

“You feeling ok over there?” Jim asks, refocusing his attention on the road.

He hears the sound of El shifting in her seat and can see out of the corner of his eye that she’s looking over at him now. “Yeah, I’m ok. Need the Advil to keep working it’s magic, but fine otherwise.”

Jim nods, heart going out to her. He’ll never fully understand what she goes through every month and it makes him a little uncomfortable in a way he’s mostly successful in suppressing, but he knows he really would do anything to help her. Including possibly facing Joyce again only a couple of days after seeing her unexpectedly – which really isn’t enough time to mentally prepare himself to see her again.

“So,” El says, pausing leadingly, cutting into Jim’s thoughts.

Jim glances over at her to see El giving him a curious, mischievous smile. “So…?” he asks back, both tentative and suspicious.

“If Joyce is there, are you gonna figure out when you two are gonna get together to catch up?” If anything, El’s smile just gets more mischievous, though it’s wrapped in an innocence that is so transparent, it gives cleaned glass a run for its money.

“Don’t see why that’s any of your business,” Jim says, looking back at the road. “And don’t think I can’t see what you’ve been up to these past couple of days. You’re not as subtle as you think.”

“Whoever said I was going for subtle?” El asks.

“Oh, I don’t know, maybe the way you’ve been dancing around what you’re really trying to do?” Jim says, one eyebrow quirking.

But El meets his accusation with a broad smile and an unflinching gaze. “No, that was me trying not to push you too hard because I know how you can get. You know me, Dad. I don’t *do* subtle.”

*Yeah, she’s definitely his daughter.*

Jim laughs, despite the absurdity of it all. “I really feel sorry for whatever guy you end up with someday. You’re going to make his head explode.”

A light blush covers El’s cheeks, like there’s a specific guy attached to that blush brought on by his words, and Jim wants to ask about it – *so, is there a boy?* – but El keeps the topic on the matter at hand. “Hey, this isn’t about me,” she says. “I just want you to be happy. And you haven’t dated anyone since Mom left, you know. I worry about what’ll happen to you once I go to college.”

The sentiment is touching and one Jim never expected to hear from his teenage daughter. “El, honey, it’s not your job to worry about me,” he says, annoyance at El’s nascent attempts at matchmaking fading away nearly completely. “And my love life is *definitely* not something for you to worry
“Oh ho, so you do admit that there is something that went on between you and Joyce!” El says, voice pitching up with excitement.

Jim’s lips curl in a grimace. Dammit. “El, don’t you even dare think about it.”

“I won’t do whatever you think I’m planning if you promise to make plans with Joyce to catch up. If she’s at the store when we get there, that is,” El says.

Jim pauses, thinking, before he huffs out a sharp breath from his nose. “Ok, fine,” he says, despite the way that his heart feels like it’s about to fall into his stomach. “If Joyce is there, I’ll ask her about getting together sometime. But just to catch up!” Jim looks over at her, an insistent finger pointed in her direction. “Nothing more than that, ok? It’s just going to be two friends, filling each other in on what’s been going on in their lives since the last time they saw each other. Happy?”

El gives him a smug smile and settles back in the passenger seat. “Very,” she says, tone prim and triumphant. “This is going to be good for you, you know,” El says after a moment.

“Well, I’m glad I have your approval,” Jim grumbles, annoyed at how easily his daughter can manipulate him into doing what she wants. God, I’m such a pushover.

The rest of the short ride is quiet and, both before he knows it and before he’s ready, Jim’s pulling up into an empty parking spot in front of Melvald’s. The cold sweats come back with a vengeance, hands feeling swampy in the late summer heat, and nausea is creeping up into his throat. Nope, he’s not ready for this, not at all.

Hey, maybe she isn’t even here, Jim thinks as he gets out of the car, El mirroring him on the other side.

But she is. Because of course she is. Why should Jim have any good luck at all? Sometimes, he feels like he used up all his good luck in getting a kid like El as his daughter and it’s never coming back.

Joyce, of course, is standing by the cash register, smiling and chatting with a customer as she rings them up.

For a moment, Jim’s struck dumb, frozen in place by the arresting sight in front of him. Her hair’s down like it was a couple of days ago and Jim finds his fingers itching to have those strands running through them once more. And, though she’s wearing little make up – she’d never been much for it, back in high school, except for a love of smoky eyes and the occasional splash of red lipstick that always drove him crazy – her skin is clear and creamy and so, so smooth.

Yeah, Jim’s really almost positive that he never got over her. At least not all the way. And he promised El that he’d ask Joyce if she wants to catch up at some specific, predetermined time. Which means spending time alone with her for more than a couple of minutes, possibly even at least an hour. And he still might have feelings for her.

Yeah, is it just him or is it suddenly really hot in here?

El jabs her elbow into his side, unfreezing both him and time as it resumes its neat, orderly march, and Jim looks over at her, feeling more startled than a man his age probably should.

El’s looking up at him with eyes that are far too knowing for a girl her age, but she contains her amusement to a slight uptick of the corners of her lips, the only sign of the smile she’s mostly succeeding in holding back. “Hey, I’m going to go grab what I need. I take it you wanna hang out
by the register?” And then she arches one eyebrow, saying *way too much* with that one, simple gesture.

“Oh get your stuff,” Jim says, voice a little gruffer than he would like, and he reaches out to ruffle El’s hair, pulled up in a loose bun.

Right on cue, El lets out a frustrated noise and tries to duck away from the reach of his hand, but his arm is too long and he musses up the hair on the crown of her head. “Ugh, *Dad*. Why are you such an annoying troll?” she whines as she reaches up to try and reimpose whatever sense of order there was to her hair to begin with.

“Hey, takes one to know one,” Jim says. “Now scoot.”

“I’m going, I’m going,” El grumbles as she takes off into the store.

Jim follows her with his gaze and when she disappears, he lets his gaze slide over just a few more feet –

– To find Joyce staring right back at him, her previous customer long gone, leaving the two of them in the front of the store.

*Shoot, when’d that other guy leave? Way to fail at being a detective, Hopper.*

Jim offers Joyce a small, hesitant smile. “Uh, hi.” Ok, yeah, great. *That* was smooth.

But, if Joyce agrees, she certainly doesn’t betray that sentiment. “Are my eyes deceiving me?” Joyce asks with a teasing smile. “Jim Hopper, back in my store for the second time in 3 days? Seriously, I figured it’d be at least a week until you showed up again.”

Jim gives an embarrassed half-shrug – Joyce *always* had his number and it looks like she still does – and makes his way over to the counter she’s standing behind. “Yeah, well, El needed to pick up a couple of things.” At Joyce’s curious look – an intriguing arch of one eyebrow, gaze open – Jim clarifies. “Supplies for that time of the month,” he says, trying to be cool and nonchalant about this.

“Well look at this,” Joyce says, arching both eyebrows now. “Never pegged you to be so mature about this.”

Jim shrugs, but this time trying to downplay the praise. “Yeah, well, her mom wasn’t around anymore by the time El got her first period, so I had to learn to deal with it quick.”

“That’s sweet,” Joyce says and the smile on her face hits Jim right in the heart. “You’ve certainly grown up over the years, haven’t you?”

“Oh, it’s been a learning curve, that’s for sure. But there’s nothing I wouldn’t do for El – been that way from the moment she was born and I held her for the first time.”

“It’s the same with me and my boys,” Joyce says, her smiling turning into the deep, fond one of a parent. “Oh, the terrible, horrible things I’d do for them if they needed me to. So, I get it.”

Jim nods, totally understanding. “So, uh, two kids, huh?”

Joyce nods. “Yeah, my oldest is 20 and my youngest is 16, about the same age as El, I figure.”

“Yeah, El’ll be 17 in March,” Jim says.

“Same with Will – that’s my youngest.”
Well, this isn’t so bad, Jim realizes. This feels a whole lot like catching up and Jim’s barely had to do anything. The realization gives him the boost of confidence he didn’t know he needed until this moment and he pushes forward with the thing he promised El he’d do. “So, uh, not to change the subject, but when I was here a couple of days ago, you mentioned that we should get together sometime. You know, to catch up.”

“That I did,” Joyce says, her voice dipping almost low and intimate. Then, a second later, she smiles, bright with inspiration. “Hey, why don’t you come over for dinner tomorrow – you and El? Will should be home for dinner and I’m sure El probably doesn’t know many kids her age in Hawkins yet.”

Jim breathes out a laugh. “Clearly, you don’t know my daughter. She could make friends with a lamppost if she tried hard enough, I swear.”

“Ah, so your complete opposite,” Joyce says, eyes sparkling with mirth. She breathes out a laugh, shaking her head at herself. “So, dinner at my house? Tomorrow?”

Hope unfurls in his heart and Jim finds himself smiling. Despite the nervousness that’s settled in there, this, connecting with an old friend, is a better feeling than he ever expected to feel. “Yes, dinner at your house tomorrow. I’ll bring along El. Anything we should bring?”

Joyce gives him a look before she reaches for a piece of paper and a nearby pen. “Just yourselves,” she says as she begins to write something down on the paper and Jim glances over to see that it’s an address – Joyce’s address. “Here. For tomorrow. At 6,” Joyce says, sliding the paper across the counter.

Jim takes it and slaps it lightly against the index finger of the other hand. “I won’t lose it, I promise,” he says before he slips it into his back pocket.

And before either he or Joyce can say anything else, El slips up next to him and plops a box of tampons and a couple bottles of the nail polish she likes on the counter.

Jim eyes the bottles of nail polish, the brand only familiar because of how often El’s left the bottles around the apartment they lived in back in New York, and then he eyes her. “More nail polish? Really?”

El shrugs. “Hey, I’m having an emotionally trying day,” she says, batting her eyelashes as she gives him big puppy dog eyes and Jim feels himself caving in from one breath to the next.

“Ok, ok,” he sighs as he turns back to Joyce. “Ring all this up, please. And ignore the way I was just extorted into buying my daughter more nail polish.”

“Oh, you know you love me,” El says and Jim looks to see Joyce smiling at the back-and-forth between father and daughter, her smile amused and fond all at the same time.

“Well, here you go, sweetheart,” Joyce says after Jim’s paid up, handing the bag over to El. “You take care and I’ll see you both tomorrow, ok?”

El looks back and forth between Jim and Joyce, confusion etched on her features, and Jim takes pity on her. “Joyce invited us over for dinner tomorrow.”

A smile lights up El’s face and she gives Jim a smile that’s proud and smug at the same time. “Wow, that’s so nice. Thank you, Joyce.” She pauses, brow furrowing, teeth flashing out to chew on her lower lip, and she looks over at Joyce. “Did you want us to bring anything?”
At that, Joyce lets out a bright laugh. “Oh my god, you two are so related,” she says as her laughter calms. “But, that’s ok. Thank you, though.”

El hums, nodding. “Ok, I think I’ll bring over some brownies.” A hand comes up, finger pointed sharply. “And don’t try to change my mind.”

Jim shrugs, not at all apologetically, as he looks back over at Joyce. “You’d have better luck changing the direction of gravity,” he says. “Plus, El makes amazing brownies,” he follows up to the sight of El’s beaming smile.

“Ok, ok,” Joyce says, holding her hands up in fake surrender. “You win. Thank you for bringing dessert. That’s very nice of you, El.”

“You’re welcome,” El says, smiling like she’s going to float away from sheer happiness.

“Alright, alright, we should be going,” Jim says, nudging El between her shoulder blades. “We’ll see you tomorrow, Joyce.”

“Yes, tomorrow!” El all but chirps.

Joyce gives them a small wave, a delicate trill of her fingers that makes Jim’s heart skip a stupid beat. “Until them,” she says and then Jim finishes pushing El out of Melvald’s and out into the summer air.

“There, see? Was that so hard?” El says as they head to the car.

“Yeah, yeah,” Jim says as he unlocks the car. “Maybe now you’ll get off my back about this.”

“Hmm, unlikely,” El says, lips curled in a smile. “The next step is actually asking her out on a date.”

Jim just rolls his eyes, torn between laughing and groaning. And even though his stomach gurgles with anxiety, tying itself up in knots with the fear of, oh god, maybe putting himself back out there, he has to admit it’s been too long since he looked forward to something quite like this.

But he’ll never tell El that. He does have some dignity left, after all.

Not a lot.

But some.

It only takes about 10 minutes for Joyce to realize what in the hell she’s just signed herself up for as she stands behind the front counter at work.

In a little more than 24 hours, Jim Hopper is going to be at her house. Jim Hopper, the one who got away (or is she the one who got away?). Jim Hopper, who she’s known for as long as she can remember and who she once upon a time swore she was in love with.

Jim Hopper who left town after high school and never looked back, breaking Joyce’s heart in the process.

Oh, she hadn’t been able to admit it at the time. She’d been too swept up with Lonnie to notice it at first. But, as time went on, the hollow ache of a slowly healing broken heart made itself known to her.
It wasn’t so much that she thought she was in love with Hopper (though, deep down, she was, but denial is a funny, funny thing and it wasn’t until much later that she was able to admit that yes, she was – or, at least, she had been). It was that, for the first time in her life, she found herself without one of her closest friends.

Hop had always just been there and the absence of his casual, steady presence in her life was what hit her the hardest. Joyce had always been able to turn around and have him there if she ever needed anyone for anything, even just someone to hang out with and smoke cigarettes beneath the bleachers while cutting class. But then Hop was gone and Joyce’s world was suddenly a whole lot shakier.

For a while, though, she had Lonnie, then Jonathan. And then, finally, Will.

But, then, it’d all started to fall apart. Arguments between her and Lonnie turned into full-on screaming matches and, before she knew it, she was watching his taillights fade away down the driveway as he fled to Indianapolis, the ink on the divorce papers still drying where they sat on (suddenly) her kitchen table.

And, though Joyce was not one to dwell on what-ifs (not when she loved her two boys with every fiber of her being), she was filled with regret when she realized that she no longer had Hop’s presence in her life, regret that she hadn’t done more – anything – to keep in touch with him over the years.

Because, in that moment, what Joyce Byers really needed was her friend, the one who made her laugh and roll her eyes at the same time and whose devilishly handsome good looks could charm her out of any bad mood that clouded her head.

But Hop wasn’t there. She hadn’t even spoken to him since they graduated high school. Last she’d heard was that he was still living in New York, working as a police officer, and married with a kid. Which just left Joyce to pick up the pieces of her life on her own.

She’d been able to admit, even if only to herself, as she slowly knit her life back together, that she’d been in love with Jim Hopper, had before she even got swept up into Lonnie’s magnetic orbit. It’d been a quiet, unassuming love, deep and unfathomable, and it ached to know it’d taken her so long to realize it.

So, as part of putting her life back together, Joyce also had to get over and put her feelings for Hop in the past. And, because he wasn’t coming back, she’d been able to do just that, letting her heart move on until the memory was nothing more than nostalgia-tinged wistfulness.

All that changed, though, when word spread around town that Hopper was moving back to Hawkins. Suddenly, it felt like all of the gossiping eyes were on her every time a customer came into Melvald’s or she stopped by the supermarket for groceries. Hell, even Karen Wheeler had not-so-subtly tried to get some answers from Joyce when she’d dropped Will off at the Wheelers so he could hang out with his friends.

But Joyce is wily and crafty – she’d had to be after years of making every resource stretch thinner than humanly possible – and she’d sidestepped the inquiries with the oblivious grace she’d built up over the years to keep prying eyes out of her business.

Still didn’t stop her internal panic from flaring up, though, whenever she heard Hop’s name. Still didn’t stop her heart from racing whenever she thought she spotted him walking down the street through Melvald’s storefront windows.

She’d expected to run into him on the street, at the grocery store – Hawkins is a small town, so it was
only a matter of time, really – but she hadn’t expected him to just walk into Melvald’s and surprise her at the cash register, a teenage girl who could only be his daughter in tow.

*How had she missed him walking into the store?* was the thought that’d been running through her head, shock rendering her almost dumb at the sight of him, calling out his name while he was distracted by looking at the magazines by the register.

Hop had looked over at her, surprise etched on every inch of his face, and when he did, oh, how Joyce’s heart skipped a beat.

He looked good – better than she remembered, actually. Tall and broad shouldered with firm features and piercing blue eyes. He’d put on a little weight around the middle, an unfortunate curse of most men his age, but he carried it well. It matched nicely with his broad chest and shoulders and it reminded her of just how *powerful* he was… and how strong his hugs were.

As they’d talked – a little awkwardly and punctuated by Hop introducing Joyce to his daughter, El, a beautiful girl whose smile lit up the whole store – Joyce hadn’t been able to stop thinking about the last time he hugged her… and how *badly* she wanted to experience it again.

They’d ended the conversation with her ringing up his purchases and exchanging promises to catch up sometime. Though, she’d seen the way Hop had paled when the words “we should catch up sometime” left her mouth and she figured that it’d be at least several days until she saw him again, until her next chance to ask.

And Joyce was going to ask. Because she realized, as she watched him and El leave the store, that she’d let Jim Hopper go once upon a time. And she wasn’t going to make that mistake again.

So, imagine her surprise when Hop walked in through the door at Melvald’s two days later, daughter in tow, to buy tampons (and bonus nail polish) for El.

This time, though, he’d brought up getting together to catch up before she could, shocking her into losing her senses enough to invite him over for dinner the next day without thinking – him and El.

Joyce had felt like she was floating as she gave Hop her address and then watched him walk out of the store, El by his side. Joyce had been completely unable to stop tracing the lines of Hop’s shoulders and back with her eyes and she’d done a poor job of suppressing the way desire spread out from her lower belly. God, over 20 years later and Hop can still make her all hot and bothered.

(*never mind the fact that it’s been she doesn’t know how long since she’d felt the touch of a man, since she’d gotten relief from somewhere other than her own fingers. need fills her and joyce desperately wants hop to scratch this particular itch.*)

But, now, the full force of what she’s done is hitting her and Joyce feels the beginnings of panic stirring inside of her.

*Holy shit, my house is a mess.*

All Joyce can think about for the remainder of her shift is the mess waiting for her at home that she’s going to have to clean (never mind figuring out what to make that will be *remotely* edible – Joyce has never been more frustrated at her limited cooking repertoire). She thinks about the mountains of laundry on the couch and half the dining room chairs, the clutter on the sofa table, the dishes and detritus collected on her kitchen counters, and Joyce knows she has a hard road to hoe ahead of her to get things ready for tomorrow if she wants to have guests over.

By the time Joyce gets home late that night, though, she’s exhausted from the combination of a long
day at work and nervousness that’s been steadily building inside of her. She’s grateful for the empty house (Will’s spending the night at the Hendersons) as she all but collapses into bed and falls asleep within minutes.

The next day is a frantic flurry of motion – cleaning and tidying; running to the grocery store to get the ingredients for her pot roast, the best thing she knows how to make; rooting through her closet for the perfect outfit that will walk the fine line between attractive and trying too hard.

But, she manages, though. By quarter to 6, the house is clean (at least the public rooms are), her pot roast is finishing simmering in the slow cooker, and she’s dressed in a pair of black jeans and an emerald green blouse that goes nicely with her dark hair and doesn’t manage to make her look too desperate while still making her feel pretty (and, lord, it’s been a long time since she’s even wanted to feel pretty, much less actually feel it). And she’s never felt more nervous for anything in her entire life.

Don’t think about that. Just think about getting through this evening and having a good time. The thought helps and Joyce is able to focus on what comes next, on making sure that everything is good and in place.

The only thing that’s missing is her son, and well, their guests.

Claudia should be dropping Will off soon, Joyce thinks as she eyes the clock out of the corner of her eye while checking on the mashed potatoes sitting on the stove, dial turned to the “warm” setting just to keep the potatoes from turning thick and glue-like.

And, just like magic, the front door lock jingles a bit before the door opens, Will’s shout of “Mom, I’m home!” echoing through the living room.

“In the kitchen, honey!” Joyce shouts back, putting the spoon she’s been using for the mashed potatoes on the spoon rest by the stove.

She hears Will’s shuffling footsteps, a little slower than normal, like he’s realizing that something is different, and she turns around to see him approaching the kitchen. “Mom, what’s going on? Why is the house so clean?” Will asks as he stops beneath the archway between the living room and the kitchen. He pauses, eyeing her. “And why are you dressed so nice?”

For a moment, Joyce looks at her youngest son, appraising eye turned on his current state. Will’s wearing jeans and a t-shirt, both items of clothing looking like they need to be run through the washing machine, but his hair looks relatively clean and he’s not overly dirty or anything. Still, could use improvement.

“Will, honey, I need you to go change your clothes and put your stuff in your room.”

Will’s brow furrows and his head tilts just a little to the right, like it usually does when he’s confused. “But, Mom, I just got home. Why—?”

“Because we’re having people over for dinner,” Joyce says. “Now, go change. You want to look nice for our guests, right?”

The confused look only deepens and Will purses his lips just a bit. “Um, yeah, sure, I guess,” he says, slowly. “But, I just got—”

Joyce cuts off whatever protest her son is about to lodge. “Will, please, this is important, ok? Just please, can you do as I ask?”

“Ok, Mom,” Will says with a sigh, shoulders slumping a little in defeat. But the confused look is still
on his face. “I’ll be, um, I’ll be right back,” he says as he hefts his backpack higher onto his shoulder and trudges off towards his room.

Joyce lets out a sigh of relief as she hears Will’s bedroom door open and shut. Ok, that’s one less thing to worry about, she thinks.

Now, she just needs Hopper and El to show up.

And, so, she waits.

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We’re having ‘guests’ over for dinner? We never have guests over for dinner.

The thought is accompanied by a huffed breath as Will throws his backpack onto his bed, bedroom door closing heavily behind him from a hard shove with his foot.

He’s still reeling a bit from coming home to a clean house (something he hasn’t seen in months) and the smell of his mom’s pot roast wafting out from the kitchen. Those on their own are confusing and rare enough without the added layer of people coming over, which just feels foreign to the point of bizarre.

Man, all Will wants to do is collapse on his bed, maybe play some music on his phone, and just recharge after a long weekend.

It was a really good weekend, though. Hanging out in Mike’s basement playing video games all day Saturday; Will heading over with Dustin to the Henderson household, the two boys staying up way too late diving deep into comic book lore and theories; followed by another day of video games, this time at Dustin’s house, the four boys crowded around the TV in Dustin’s room as they battled on the virtual fields.

And though Will loves the other guys with every fiber of his being, the truth of it is that being around them is exhausting. Between the three of them, Mike, Lucas, and Dustin are a lot. They’re loud, argumentative, and boisterous, all in the best ways possible.

Will is the odd man out, so to speak. He’s quieter, more reserved, and generally much more go-with-the-flow than the rest of his friends, sometimes to the point where Will wonders how he ever became and stayed friends with the others. And he has to push himself to keep up with their energy levels, drawing on reserves he doesn’t really have to match and stay in the conversation.

But Will knows. The bonds between them are closer than friends – they’re practically family, brothers in all but blood, there for each other to the ends of the earth and back. Will may only be 16 years old, but he knows this down to the core of who he is as a person, sure as he is that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west.

It still doesn’t mean that being around the Party isn’t exhausting as fuck, especially for poor, slightly introverted Will. Ergo, why he just wants to fall face down onto his bed and not move until he has to get up for school the next morning.

His mom asked him to do something for her, though, and Joyce Byers almost never asks Will for any kind of favor. But, when Will got home, his mom hadn’t looked tired or drawn or worried. Sure, she’d looked a little nervous, but she also looked happy and it’s been a long time since Will’s seen his mom this happy over anything.
Must be someone real special or something, Will thinks as he goes off to do what his mom asked him and change his clothes for dinner.

It doesn’t take Will long – he really doesn’t have a whole lot of options to choose from – and he emerges from his bedroom a couple of minutes later in his best jeans (no rips or tears and barely faded) and a white button down shirt mostly neatly tucked in.

He heads back out towards the kitchen, feet gently padding against the carpet, and spots his mom setting the table in the dining room. “Hey, mom, let me do that,” Will says, noticing the frantic air that surrounds his mom, the hint of manic energy in the tremble of her hands, the way her gaze dances across every corner of the room with a critical eye.

His mom looks over at him, momentarily stunned into stillness. “Baby, are you sure?” she asks.

But, before Will can answer, the doorbell rings – they’re guests have arrived.

His mom jumps, a small shriek leaving her, and that nervousness ratchets up another notch. “Oh god, they’re early.” She eyes him, gaze wide and a little panicked. “Will, honey, go answer the door while I quickly finish up, ok?”

Will has to admit that he’s intensely curious as to who’s coming over for dinner and, even though his mom definitely looks like she could use the help in setting the table, he doesn’t argue with her and ambles on over to the front door, having absolutely no clue who could be on the other side.

Will opens the front door and, immediately, his gaze fills with the sight of the largest man he’s ever seen in his entire life. As tall as Mike, but twice as broad, his face partially covered with a goatee, his stance both nervous and solid at the same time as he stands there wearing jeans and a nice sweater. There’s a kind look on his face, though, despite looking like he could pound Will into the ground without a second thought, and it helps put Will a little at ease.

But there’s another person standing next to this strange man and Will’s gaze slides over to see who their second guest is, only to see–

“El?” Will asks, blinking, looking over at the girl he’s only really interacted with a couple of times, shock jolting through him. She’s wearing a nice dress – dark blue, fabric hugging close to her body as it wraps around her, sleeves coming down to just past her elbows – her hair pulled up in a half-ponytail, and, in her arms, she’s carrying a plate covered with plastic wrap, protecting what looks like homemade brownies resting beneath.

El startles a little at the sound of her voice and Will knows she recognizes him when, a split second later, a smile curves up her lips. “Will?” she asks, not in question of his name but in surprise to see him. “What are you doing here?” She blinks, blushing. “Wait, is Joyce your mom?”

Will can’t help it as a giggle escapes him. “My whole life,” he quips.

“I, uh, take it you two know each other?” the man – presumably El’s dad – asks.

El lets out a laugh of her own. “Yeah, Dad, Will and I have Honors Chem together.”

A smirk crosses Chief Hopper’s face. “Wait, is this–?”

“No, Dad,” El says, cutting her dad off with a glare. “And stop prying. I’m not going to tell you anything.”

Chief Hopper holds up his hands in defeat. “Alright, alright, so sue me for taking an interest in my
daughter’s love life.”

“Ugh, Dad,” El says, blushing. She obviously wants to fidget with something, but her hands are full with the plate of brownies, so she just squirms a little in place. “Stop. Please.”

Will lets out an awkward cough – this is not a conversation he wants to be in the middle of – and steps aside to give El and her dad space to step through the door. “Please, come in. My mom’s just finishing up setting the table.”

“Thanks for letting us in,” Chief Hopper says, voice trailing off leadingly, obviously seeking an introduction.

“Oh, and, um, I’m Will – Will Byers, though I think you probably could have guessed that part,” Will says, cursing himself for his awkwardness as he holds out his hand for the Chief to shake. “It’s nice to meet you, sir.”

Chief Hopper takes Will’s hand and gives it a firm shake that is most definitely too firm. “Nice to meet you, Will. And, please, don’t call me ‘sir’. Just ‘Hopper’ or ‘Hop’ is fine.”

Will nods, maybe a little too quickly, feeling awkward and unable to stop. “Oh, ok, um, Hopper,” he says, voice feeling weak. He shuts the front door and gestures towards the direction of the kitchen. “Well, my mom’s just this way and-”

Will doesn’t get a chance to finish speaking as his mom rushes out into the family room, hands smoothing over her thighs, a bright if nervous smile on her face. “Hop! El! You made it!”

“Hi, sorry we’re a little early,” Hopper says. “El was anxious to get here.” There’s something unsettled about how Hopper is standing, something Will understands instinctually – Will likes to imagine that if Hopper had a hat, he’d be wringing it in his hands – and it’s, well... perplexing.

Especially when Will glances back over at his mom and sees that she’s just as unsettled, but… not in a bad way? She occasionally reaches up to fuss with her hair or finger the hem of her blouse in a way that kinda reminds Will of some of the girls at school when they’re talking to a boy that they like.

But, this is his mom. She’s not a kid anymore. She’s past the age of crushes and boys, so that can’t be it.

Can it?

Will’s wonderings get cut off when El lets out a groan. “Dad, please. Don’t try to put this on me.” She looks over at Will’s mom, a bright and charming smile on her face that’s, as far as Will can tell, completely and totally genuine. “He’s been looking forward to this all day,” El says before she holds out the plate with the brownies on it. “And, like I promised, brownies for dessert. Is there somewhere I can put them?”

Will’s mom smiles so big it’s almost too much, her expression touched and overjoyed. “Oh, sweetie, you really didn’t have to, but thank you. I’m sure they’re delicious.” She takes the plate from El’s outstretched hands and looks over at Hopper. “Hop, you want something to drink? Dinner’s still got a few more minutes before it’s ready.”

Hopper smiles. “Sure, sounds good.”

Will’s mom smiles at Hopper before she looks over at Will, smile softening. “Will, honey, why don’t you show El around the house? Give her the tour.”

With that, Will’s mom leads Hopper into the kitchen (“Joyce, it smells fantastic in here.”), leaving El, who’s probably the most popular girl in school currently, alone with Will, who’s definitely, well, neither a girl nor popular.

And, immediately, shame crawls up Will’s spine as he looks around his house, faced with having to show around a girl who’s probably got it all around his shabby house at the edge of town. He’s long since come to terms with his family’s lack of money. It’d stung when he was younger, when all of his friends had shiny, new toys and clothes that weren’t hand-me downs and he was left with bargain store discounts and his brother’s old clothes.

As he’s gotten older, Will’s been able to accept and understand why he couldn’t have all the new things his friends seemed to get with ease. He’s seen his mom working long shifts just to make enough to make ends meet – hell, he sells some of his artwork online and occasionally picks up shifts at Melvald’s to help out when things get really tight around the house.

But it’s one thing to accept it privately and among close friends. It’s another thing to have your family’s relative poverty exposed to a girl who has the potential to make his life a living hell if she wanted to.

“So, um,” Will starts awkwardly, voice weak and a little shaky. He’s really only interacted with El once before – at lunch on Thursday where he could barely keep from laughing at how besotted Mike is with the new girl – and this is the first time he’s been with her alone. So he’s not really sure where to go from here. “Yeah, so this is the living room,” he finishes lamely.

El lets out a giggle, the sound not unkind. “So I can see,” she says.

“I know it’s not much – my family really doesn’t have a lot of money,” Will blurts out, immediately cringing. “But, yeah, it’s-”

El reaches out and places a hand on his arm, immediately shutting him up. Will finds himself transfixed by the gentle, understanding smile on El’s face. “Will, it’s ok. My dad and I used to live in a shitty apartment in Brooklyn because what my dad made as a detective doesn’t really go so far in New York City. Almost everything I own I bought from thrift stores and on sale. So I get it, I promise.” She removes her hand and tilts her head to one side, hair bouncing around her shoulders. “So just, like, show me around. Like where’s the bathroom and your room and stuff. Don’t worry about anything else, ok?”

Will can see from the look in El’s eyes that she understands. She truly understands – no judgment, just compassion – and the relief that sweeps through him is almost palpable. Will also can’t help the way surprise ripples through in the wake of that relief, though he’s realizing maybe he shouldn’t be surprised at El’s kindness, at her gentle understanding. He’s seen her from varying distances over the past week – from across the cafeteria to sitting a foot away from him at lunch. He’s seen El greet and talk to and befriend just about everyone who’s crossed her path, no matter how popular or unpopular they are. She always has a kind word for others, almost always with a smile on her face, and she either doesn’t notice or doesn’t care about the fairly rigid social hierarchy that exists at Hawkins High.

And regardless of which it is – either that she doesn’t notice or doesn’t care – and regardless of the fact that Will doesn’t know El that well at all, she seems like she has the kind of stubborn confidence to keep moving forward, to let whatever consequences of breaking the established social order there might be just roll off her back.
Will wishes he could be that brave and, he won’t lie, he thinks El might be becoming one of his
heroes.

So, Will smiles over at El and breathes out a quiet, relieved laugh. “Ok, let me show you around.”

It’s a quick tour – the house isn’t very big – and Will shows her where the bathroom is and his room
and the backyard. And when they come back inside, it’s time for dinner.

Will’s mom and Hopper end up driving the majority of the dinner discussion. Will stays quiet, not
knowing what to say, and El only interjects every so often, mostly with a compliment for his mom
about the food or to get in a sly dig at her dad every once in a while. But she, too, seems content to
let the adults talk and Will notices that El’s watching his mom and Hopper talk with a small, if giddy
smile on her face.

Then, after dinner, Will’s mom pulls out a bottle of whiskey she has hidden in one of the upper
cabinets (not that Will would ever want to touch the stuff – even beer’s too strong for him) and offers
Hopper an “after-dinner drink” to go with the brownies El made.

El nudges Will as she’s helping gather the plates from the table into a neat stack and she smiles.
“Hey, wanna grab a couple of brownies and go hang out in your room? I think they’re going to be a
little while longer.”

“Yeah, sure!” Will says, nodding almost too eagerly. “It’ll be nice to get away from the grown-ups
for a bit.”

El giggles as they take the plates from the table into the kitchen. “You say that like we aren’t almost
adults ourselves.”

Will shudders and it’s only mostly in jest. “God, don’t say that. I don’t wanna have nightmares.” El
laughs at his quip and he feels like if he can make someone like El laugh that bright, he can do
anything.

They take their plates to the sink and Will glances over at the plate of brownies sitting on the end of
the counter. In the background, his mom and Hopper are sitting down at the kitchen table, already
sipping whiskey out of mismatched glasses, each with a brownie in front of them. And, when Will
glances back over at El, an idea coming to mind, she’s already looking back at him with a sly
expression that mirrors what he’s feeling inside.

“You thinking what I’m thinking?” Will asks as his lips curl up in a smile.

El arches an eyebrow, mirth playing around the corners of her eyes. “That we each grab a few
brownies before we head back to your room?”

“Exactly,” Will says with a low laugh.

So, Will grabs them each a small plate so they can grab their own brownies before heading back to
his room. “Mom, we’re going to go hang out in my room for a bit,” Will says over his shoulder,
pausing in the entry to the kitchen with El right behind him.

“Ok, have fun, you two,” his mom says, half-distracted.

And, as Will leads El down to his room, he can hear the sounds of his mom and Hopper laughing
and talking behind him, sounding like they’re having a good time.

“So,” Will says as he shuts the door to his room behind them, once he and El are both inside. “It, uh,
sounds like your dad and my mom used to be friends.” He eyes the bed and panics, seeing his stuff strewn all across it. “Oh, wait, shit, sorry. My room’s a mess.” He casts his gaze around frantically and sees that his desk is pretty clean – well, relatively, that is. There’s scattered art supplies across the surface, but the chair is free. “You can, uh, you can sit at my desk, if you want.”

El gives him a smile. “Ok, thanks,” she says as she maneuvers around the twin bed to the desk. She angles the chair so she can look at him and places her small plate of brownies on top of one of his notebooks. “And, I think there’s more going on between my dad and your mom than just them being old friends.”

Will pushes his backpack over so he can sit on his bed, legs folded up in front of him with his plate balanced on one knee. “Really?” he asks, nose wrinkling with both confusion and a little bit of disgust.

El waggles her eyebrows and smiles mischievously. “Oh yeah. I think they used to have crushes on each other. And, if I’m not mistaken, I think my dad still has the hots for your mom.”

“Oh, gross, don’t say it like that,” Will says, stomach turning. “Adults shouldn’t be allowed to ‘have the hots’ for each other.”

“Why not?” El asks, looking at him archly, before she breaks off a piece of her brownie and pops it into her mouth.

Will, who was preparing to take his own bite of the dessert, pauses with the brownie half-way up to his mouth as he struggles to think of an answer. “I guess… hmm, I guess I don’t really have an answer.”

“Exactly. Adults have feelings just like the rest of us,” El says. She folds her arm over the back of the chair, chin resting on her wrist. “Besides, it’s been too long since my dad’s looked so happy. You should have seen him. He spent hours freaking out about what to wear to dinner tonight. Like he just wanted this to go super well.”

Will thinks back to the nervous, giddy energy his mom had right when he got home, all excitement and anticipation, and he nods. “Yeah, my mom was the same,” he says with a soft sigh before he finally takes his first bite of the brownie. Immediately the chocolate melts on his tongue, the rich flavor exploding in his mouth, and Will can’t hold back the sound of appreciation that escapes him at just how good it is. “Oh my god, El, these brownies are amazing,” he says, looking over at her with wide, incredulous eyes.

A blush crawls up El’s cheeks and she glances away for just a second, suddenly a little bashful. “Oh, uh, thank you. I didn’t want us to come over empty-handed and, well, I can make pretty good brownies, so….” She trails off, one shoulder lifting in a delicate, half-shrug.

“Seriously, if you and your dad want to come over for dinner all the time and bring over these brownies, I’d be totally fine with that.”

“Well, I’m glad you like them,” El says with a small laugh. “And I will bring them over anytime.” She turns to grab another piece of her own brownie and Will knows the moment she spots some of his artwork by how she freezes, fingers poised just above the baked treat. “Will, did you draw these?” she asks, pushing aside the plate and notebook to look at the loose sheaf of papers beneath. “They’re so good.”

At first, Will freezes, temporarily scared of what El might say – will she mock him? Dismiss him? Insult him? – but he relaxes under the praise, worry that she’d make fun of him there and gone in a
blink of an eye. “I like to draw,” Will says. “Here, which ones are you looking at?” He scoots across
the bed so he can lean over, face maybe a couple feet away from hers, and see which of his art she
has in her hands.

El slides the papers off the desk and turns back to face him, slowly riffling through them. “Wow…
hey, wait a minute, is this inspired by ‘The Dresden Files’?” She turns the one she’s looking at so
Will can see it, eyes bright and excited.

It’s a drawing of a man – a wizard, to be specific – standing in the middle of a generic city street,
staff in hand, trench coat blowing behind him like a modern-day cloak. It was just something that
came to Will one day, not inspired by anything in particular. “Um, no,” he says. “I – ‘The Dresden
Files’?” He hopes the simple question will be enough to explain, hopes that he’s not going to have to
reveal his deep lack of cultural knowledge. He thinks he’s maybe heard of whatever El’s talking
about, but he’s really not sure.

Luckily, Will’s simple question suffices. “Oh my god, you’ve never heard of the books?” El asks,
jaw dropping in shock and a little disappointment and Will feels a little bad since it kinda makes him
feel like he’s just kicked her puppy, that he doesn’t know what she’s talking about.

“Um, no. I don’t really read as much as I’d like and our library’s kinda shit. Like the selection is
horrible. Most of the books I read I borrow from the guys,” Will says, hoping El’s not about to judge
him too hard.

“Oh, I own all of them, so I’d be happy to lend them to you,” El says. “They’re amazing. It’s like
Harry Potter, but for grown-ups, you know? They’re about this wizard who lives in Chicago and
saves the day by being smart and clever. Such a great series. Honestly, you’d love them. I can lend
you the first one, if you wanna check it out.”

El’s energy is so contagious that, even with her very simple overview of the plot, Will finds himself
getting excited, too. “Um, yeah, sure. That’d be great! If you don’t mind, that is.”

“Oh, not at all,” El says, bouncing a little in the chair, all giddy and adorable. “I’ll bring the first one
for you tomorrow. And you have to tell me what you think, ok? I need someone to talk about these
with.”

“Oh, whenever you get a chance is fine. Doesn’t have to be tomorrow,” Will says, not wanting El to
go out of her way or anything.

But the look that she gives him is flat and leaves no room for argument. “Tomorrow. I promise,” she
says. “Cross my heart,” she says, index finger drawing an X over her heart.

Will’s heard many a promises over the years. Some from his dad, a few from his mom, and too many
from his peers. Not his friends – no, they don’t break promises, no matter what. But from other kids,
kids who’ve wanted something from him, who made promises to get him to go along with whatever
they wanted or needed or to set him up to bully him and make fun of him.

For a moment, that’s all Will can think of, of the times he was tricked with false promises. He thinks
of the pain and the mockery and his heart falls down to the pit of his stomach.

But El’s different. Will’s not sure how he knows, but he does. And, besides, it’s not like she’s
promising to be friends with him. The worst that happens is he doesn’t get to read a cool book, not a
massive loss.

So Will lets himself smile and he breathes out a quiet laugh. “Ok, tomorrow. I’ll hold you to it.”
“Ok, good,” El says, a soft smile on her face. She glances away and Will follows her gaze until it lands on the framed picture sitting on the edge of his desk. It’s one Jonathan took a few years ago, of the Party – just the boys – as they pose in their Halloween costumes the year they went as the Ghostbusters in 8th grade. There are smiles on all of their faces as they pose outside Lucas’ house, ready to go out and have fun trick or treating, their last and final time doing it.

Will looks back at El and pauses at the smile on her face – amused, wistful, and heartened all at once – the expression on her face robbing him of his words.

“You guys have been friends for a long time, haven’t you?” El asks, her voice soft, almost sad.

Will nods, even though El can’t see it with her gaze still focused on the picture. “Yeah, pretty much my whole life. Lucas, Mike and I became friends in kindergarten, and then Dustin joined the group pretty much immediately when he moved to Hawkins in 4th grade. And then when Max started dating Lucas in 8th grade after she moved here, she joined the Party, too.”


Will’s cheeks immediately heat up and his heart stumbles in his chest. Oh shit, didn’t mean to say that. “Oh, um, yeah. Sorry, we’re, like, super nerdy. When we were kids, the four of us started playing Dungeons & Dragons and, well, we just started calling ourselves ‘The Party’ because we thought it sounded cool. We don’t think it’s as cool anymore, but it stuck, so….” Will shrugs and looks away, trying not to give away anymore embarrassment, but sure that he’s failing miserably.

“Aw, that’s adorable!” El says, clapping her hands together. Will looks back up at her to see El with a bright smile and his embarrassment turns into confusion. “And you guys play D&D? That’s cool. There was a group at my old school who used to run regular campaigns and I always tried to get them to let me join, but they never would.” El pauses, pouting. It’s mostly for show, but Will can see a hint of true emotion behind it. “I wanted to be a mage. So, instead, I’d stay home and play ‘Skyrim’ by myself.”

Will can’t help the guffaw that escapes him. “Wait, you play video games?” It’s not like Will doesn’t know that girls play video games – Max does and she routinely kicks all their asses in multiplayer, so that’s not it. It’s just that Will’s never heard of a pretty (yes, even Will can admit that El’s pretty – just because he’s gay doesn’t mean he’s blind), popular girl playing video games before. He didn’t know they could even exist.

“Duh,” El says, smirking like Will should have been able to know this just from looking at her. “Dad got me started when he bought me a Wii as a kid and I never looked back.”

It hits Will a split second later. “Oh my god, you’re a nerd.” A pretty, popular, nerd.

El throws her hands up in victory. “Thank you! See, this is what I keep trying to tell everyone, and they don’t believe me. Just because I have amazing fashion sense and do Pep Squad does not mean I also don’t like sci-fi and video games. Please.”

“You do Pep Squad?” Will asks with a snicker.

El gives him a look. “Hey, it’s fun and it’s a good way to make friends. Plus, who doesn’t love school spirit?” She glances away, teeth flashing out to gnaw on her lower lip. “Tryouts for the squad are tomorrow. I hope I make it on.”

“You’ll make it,” Will says, rushing to get the words out, rushing to be supportive. There’s something heart-wrenching about El doubting herself – like she should always be walking through
life with her head held high – and if Will can do something to help that, he will. Even if he doesn’t really know El that well. “They’d be stupid not to let you in.”

Though, he knows she’s a nerd, now, and that’s way more than he knew an hour ago.

“Thanks,” El says, giving him a soft smile, and the tension in her shoulders bleeds away. She turns, reaching for another piece of a brownie, and when she’s got it, she looks back at him, a conspiratorial smile on her face. “So, you play D&D and you draw. Tell me Will Byers, what else do you do in your free time?”

Over the next hour or so, until his mom comes to knock on his door and say that Hopper needs to go and take El home with him, Will and El talk. They talk about what kind of movies they like and what video games are their favorite and how they don’t understand why some people don’t like dipping their french fries in their shakes.

They discover they have a lot in common – not everything, but a lot – and by the time El has to go home, Will thinks that maybe, maybe he has a new friend. In some capacity, at any rate.

Will goes with his mom to see El and Hopper out, hands stuffed awkwardly in his pockets as he watches his mom and Hopper make their goodbyes.

“Thank you for having us over, Joyce,” Hopper says. “We’ll have to do this again sometime. Maybe over at our house?”

Will’s mom smiles, looking bright and giddy and it would be disconcerting if she didn’t look so happy. “Sounds good. Sound great, actually.”

Hopper smiles, the smile of a man who’s just won the lottery, and maybe there is something to El’s earlier proclamation that there’s something between his mom and Hopper. They’re approaching a level of simpering that is almost sickening, it’s so much.

And El looks so happy about this, Will realizes with a silent, amused laugh. He can see her sigh before she looks over at him, gaze twinkling. “See you tomorrow?”

“Yeah, in Chem class,” Will says. He takes one of his hands out of his pockets so he can wave at her.

“And I’ll have that book for you. Promise,” El says, pointing at him with a meaningful, if weighty gesture. Like she wants him to make sure that she isn’t going to forget.

Whether she is remains to be see, but Will doesn’t want to show her that he doubts her, even a little. “Looking forward to it,” he says, smiling.

“Oh, you better,” El says with a wink. She looks over at his mom and gives her a smile. “Thank you for dinner, Joyce. It was great.”

Will’s mom blushes. “Well, you’re welcome, El,” she says. “And thank you for bringing the brownies over. They were delicious.”

“What’d I tell you?” Hopper says. “She’s a mean baker.”

At this, El blushes. “Dad, stop,” she says, nudging him.

Everyone makes their final goodbyes – reiterations of promises to do this again sometime – and then Will’s mom closes the front door, leaving just her and Will in the house. She lets out a low, content
sigh, her gaze a little unfocused, but so soft and happy it makes Will’s heart feel all warm.

Will decides, right then and there, that it doesn’t matter if he’s uncomfortable or thinks it’s a little gross, if Hopper makes his mom this happy, he’ll put up with what he’s realizing is the most lovesick he’s ever seen an adult in his entire life. Because his mom deserves to be happy.

So, Will goes up to his mom and gives her a playful nudge with his elbow. “Well, that was nice. Are we going to go over to his house for dinner next? Or are you going to go alone?” he asks, a teasing snicker escaping from his throat.

It gets him the exact reaction he was looking for – his mom giving him a faux withering glare – before she rolls her eyes. “Off to bed with you,” she says.

Will does as she asks – he is tired and sleep sounds so, so good – but the entire time he’s getting ready for bed, he can’t stop thinking about the night he’s just had. And he knows, a gut feeling that takes over every fiber of his being, that El’s about to become a much bigger part of his life.

*If only he knew how much.*

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Monday mornings are the absolute worst, but being able to meet up with his friends before homeroom is a great way to soothe that particular pain.

Still, Mike’s waiting for the caffeine from his morning cup of coffee to kick in and, until then, he’s a little bleary eyed and kind of cranky.

All 5 of them are standing by Max’s locker since it’s the closest to the entrance, mumbling and groaning over life in general, it seems like. “Man, why don’t we start school at, like, 10?” Max says with a whine. “It’s *way* too early for this shit.

“It’s a conspiracy, I tell you,” Dustin says. “High school is just one elaborate torture device they inflict on innocent teenagers to teach them that life is pain.”

Lucas gives Dustin a concerned, confused look. “Man, you have *got* to stop going to those creepy internet forums,” he says, shaking his head. “They’re corrupting your brain.”

“Corrupting...or enlightening?” Dustin counters with. “You don’t know, Lucas. *You don’t know.*”

Lucas rolls his eyes. “Whatever,” he mumbles. “You’re a lost cause by this point, I swear.”

Will’s been pretty quiet since they all met up and Mike looks over at the smaller boy. It’s not unusual for Will to be the quieter of the bunch, but this is *really* quiet. “Hey, Will, you ok?” Mike asks.

Will, who’d been staring out into space, jolts back to the present with a rough shake of his head. “Oh, yeah, um, sorry. Just... late night last night, is all.”

The rest of them exchange conspiratorial grins. “Ooh, Will, did you have a *date*?” Max croons.

“Yeah,” Mike says, piling in. “Did you sneak out to meet up with some hot guy, or–?”

But, before Mike can finish his sentence, a voice calls out and cuts him off. “Will! Hey, Will!”

The Party stops and turns to look in the direction of who’s calling out for Will and Mike’s heart
immediately skips several beats in his chest before it takes off like a race horse, pounding and thumping hard against his rib cage. Because the person who called out to get Will’s attention is none other than El Hopper.

And she looks gorgeous today.

No, not just gorgeous.

Fucking hot.

Her hair’s pulled up in a high ponytail, a lush waterfall of wavy hair with curled ends swaying behind her. She’s wearing a navy blue, high-necked sweater, the fabric clinging tight to the lines of her torso, leaving very little to the imagination. But what’s really tripping Mike up, what’s stolen his breath and making him feel like he’s going to melt, is the skirt she’s wearing – a tight, black skirt that hits just at mid-thigh that she’s paired with thigh-high socks and Mary Janes, leaving the most tantalizing band of skin visible on her thighs. Mike’s fingers itch to trace the hem of those socks, and then her skirt, and then–

“El, hi!” Will says, sounding both happy and surprised, and it jolts Mike out of his hormone-fueled musings.

“I’m glad I ran into you so early!” she says, pulling around a duffle bag she’s carrying along with her backpack that Mike hadn’t noticed until now (how could he when he was too busy staring at her legs?). She unzips the front pocket and pulls out a small, worn paperback book. “Here, as promised. The first ‘Dresden Files’ book.” She pauses, looking around at the rest of the Party. “Hi, guys,” she says, smiling, almost too perky for so early on a Monday morning. But it does more for Mike than all the caffeine in the world, jolting him awake with a lovesick intensity.

Will’s jaw drops with pleased shock and Mike shares a look with the rest of the Party, all of them super confused as to what’s going on now (and if Mike’s starting to feel a little jealous that there seems to be something going on with El and Will that he didn’t know about, well… he’s not about to admit it out loud). “Oh, wow, you remembered!”

El gives Will a chiding look, but it’s gentle and soft, almost playful and Mike’s heart skips another beat in time with the butterflies that take off in his stomach. God, she’s just so pretty….

“Of course I remembered. I need someone to gush over these books with me, remember?”

“Yes, of course. How could I forget?” Will says, chuckling as he takes the book from El. “Oh, my mom wouldn’t stop raving over those brownies, by the way. She wants me to ask you to give her the recipe and maybe teach her how you made them.”

El zips up her backpack and nods. “Sure, anytime! I’m sure my dad wouldn’t mind another reason to go over to your house,” she says, winking playfully. Mike desperately wishes that wink was directed at him, but given the way his heart nearly stops at the sight, maybe it’s a good idea that it wasn’t.

“Anyway,” El continues. “I need to stop by my locker, drop off my stuff – don’t wanna carry this duffle bag around all day.”

“For Pep Squad tryouts?” Will asks. “You’re gonna be great, by the way. Just remember that.”

“Thanks,” El says, smile turning soft, a sigh escaping her. Mike wants to echo the sentiment, but his brain’s stuck on the image of El wearing the Pep Squad uniform and, welp, there’s a new fantasy Mike really didn’t need to have in his repertoire.

And then she looks up at him, her gaze meeting his across the few feet that separate them, and Mike
almost *dies* from the intensity in her eyes. There’s so much in her gaze, so much Mike can’t even begin to identify – happiness, shyness, nervousness, along with something darker, *deeper*, something Mike’s not even sure he’s brave enough to dig deep into. It could be good, *really* good… but it could also be really, *really* bad and Mike’s scared to find out which.

But, before Mike can fall deeper into El’s eyes, she smiles up at him, which is almost *worse* because Mike always feels like his heart is going to stop when she looks at him like that, like she’s happy to see him. The weekend started to make him forget the full force of her smile, but now that he’s in her presence again, with her smiling up at him like there’s no one she’d rather be smiling at, it hits him like a freight train that she’s absolutely the most beautiful girl he’s ever seen in his entire life. “Hi, Mike,” she says, cheeks lightly flushed, eyes sparkling. “I’ll, um, I’ll see you in Trig, right?”

It takes Mike a moment to find his voice, but he manages to croak out an answer when the silence starts to stretch out too long. “Oh, uh, yeah. Yeah, of course. See you then.”

A relieved breath escapes from El’s lips and she nods. “Good.” She looks over at Dustin, who’s busy looking back and forth between Mike and El with a knowing look on his face that just gets on Mike’s nerves. “Hey, Dustin, wanna head to Homeroom together?”

A broad smile crosses Dustin’s face. “Sure!” He turns to the rest of the Party and offers them a mock salute. “See you losers later.”

El giggles and waves at the others as Dustin comes over to stand next to her. “Bye guys.” Her gaze slides over to Mike once more and it’s like the whole world starts to fade away. She’s just so *pretty*, staring up at him with wide eyes and a soft smile. “See you later, Mike.”

“Bye, El,” is all Mike can say and it feels like he can barely breath out the words, he’s so transfixed.

Dustin and El take off and Mike can only stare after them, eyes locked on El’s retreating figure, on the sway of her hips and the lilting tease of her ponytail, on how she so easily and without hesitation turns to talk and laugh with Dustin, in full view of everyone. Like she doesn’t care that popular girls and nerds just *don’t* interact.

Mike’s never been more confused and more attracted to another girl in his entire life and he just *wishes* he knew what to make of El, wishes he knew how to fit her into the paradigm of his life.

“Hey, earth to Wheeler.” It’s Max’s voice, accompanied by a sharp elbow in his side. “Stop staring at the pretty girl and pay attention.”

Mike scowls and rubs at his side as he looks over at Max. “Ow, I hate you.” He glares a second later. “And I wasn’t staring.”

Max snorts. “Oh, please. You’re total heart-eyes right now, so don’t even try and deny it.”

Mike feels his scowl deepen, but he doesn’t comment on Max’s point further (because she’s right and he just doesn’t want to admit it). So, instead, he turns to Will. “So, um, care to share why El was at your house last night?”

Will rolls his eyes and stashes the book El lent him in his backpack. “C’mon, I’ll explain on my way to my locker. But, trust me, it’s not as exciting as you’re thinking, so you can just stop being jealous right now, Mike.”

Annoyance ripples down Mike’s spine and he grumbles. “Not jealous, just curious,” he says, trying not to pout and failing miserably.
(Though he is a little jealous and it’s super frustrating that everyone seems to be picking up on this. God, why couldn’t he be better at hiding his feelings? It’s just not fair.)

It’s clear, though, that Will doesn’t believe his denial and just arches an eyebrow. “Uh-huh, sure.” Will says with a little laugh. Mike kind of hates him for it. “Well, ok, it’s like this….”

Will tells him about his mom and El’s dad and how they used to be friends. He tells Mike about how his mom invited El and her dad over for dinner last night and that’s why they were hanging out as his house.

And, as Will tells him this, Mike realizes that he really is jealous. Will gets to hang out with El because of their parents; Dustin seems to be forming a friendship with El over them being in PE and Homeroom together; Max and El are bonding over Mike’s not sure what; hell, even Lucas and El seem to be getting friendly over shared music tastes and they’re only in one class together.

And Mike, who’s in three classes with her, who’s so attracted to her and wishes he could stop all at the same time–

(because that road ends in nothing but pain, especially with a girl as pretty and popular as El is and, fuck, she’s going to be on the pep squad and he’s going to have to see her in that tiny uniform at least once a week and oh god he’s not ok with this how’s he supposed to concentrate in class?)

– can’t seem to stop from tripping over his own tongue, can’t get out of his own way long enough to become friends with her. When’s he going to get his chance? Is he going to get his chance? Or is he just going to be resigned to all his friends becoming friends with her while he sits off in the corner like the awkward loser that he is?

It’s official. Mike’s the unluckiest loser on the face of the planet, cursed to crush after the most unattainable girls, while his friends get to easily be friends with the most amazing girl ever.

Yeah, it’s just his luck.

Fuck.

Chapter End Notes

And, there's my mileven here at the end. Y'all know I got you.

So I'm gonna take a short break and write a S3 one-shot that’s been brewing since, well, the moment I saw the end of ep8, but I should have the next chapter out in a few weeks. We're going to be full-steam Mileven from this point, y'all, in all it's adorable, awkward glory.

But, in the meantime, if anyone wants to come flail with me about Mileven or Stranger Things in general, come on over to tumblr and bug me there! I go by @fatechica (woohoo consistency!) so please hmu! Catch y'all on the flip side!
that brave new feeling

Chapter Notes

Well, two and a half weeks ain't bad between the last chapter and this one.

Especially considering that this chapter is 21K WORDS.

(I promise, I'm trying not to be embarrassed about this. I know you all love it, but IT'S HARD NOT TO BE.)

Anyway, get ready for nothing but excessive Mileven flirtiness with a little bit of drama thrown in for depth. I hope this was worth the wait.

Enjoy everyone! And let me know what you think!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So, you’re lending books to Will before me, huh? I’m offended, El – I thought you and I had something special.”

El looks over at Dustin as they walk through the halls of Hawkins High Monday morning before Homeroom – her second Monday, in fact. Just behind her and Dustin, maybe only 10 feet away, are the rest of Dustin’s friends who they’ve just parted ways with.

Which, of course, includes Mike. Mike, who’s looking oh so cute in jeans and an unbuttoned flannel with a white tee underneath, hair effortlessly and rakishly wild. Mike, who looked at her so sweetly and who she absolutely could not keep her eyes off of.

Mike, who she’s pretty sure is still watching her, if the pleasurable tingle she feels on the back of her neck means anything.

But, right now, El’s focused on trying to keep a straight enough face to give Dustin a wry, teasing look – not exactly the time to be all lovesick and besotted. “I wasn’t aware there was anything between us at all.” El fires back. She bites the inside of her cheek to keep from smiling too big, but it’s only partially successful and she can feel her lips curl up in a grin despite herself.

Dustin lets out a wounded gasp, totally hamming it up, as he dramatically reaches up to mime a dagger plunging into his heart. “Oh, Hopper, you’re killing me, here.”

“I’m just teasing,” El says with a bright giggle, leaning into him just enough so she can knock him with her shoulder. “No, what happened is that my dad and Will’s mom have, like, some sort of history and Joyce invited us over for dinner last night. Will and I got to talking and I discovered that there’s a series books I own that Will might be interested in, so I lent him the first one. That’s pretty much it.”

“Uh-huh, yeah, sure, ok. Nice story Hopper. But the bloom’s off the rose now, y’hear me? Off. The Rose.” Dustin’s still hamming it up and it makes El laugh, drawing a bright peel of giggles out of her (which is exactly why he does it, she knows).

So El doesn’t fight the giggles, shaking her head the entire time, and when they die down, she
changes the subject. “Hey, mind if we stop by my locker real quick? I wanna drop off my duffle bag before Homeroom.”

“Sure thing, Heart Breaker,” Dustin says with a casual shrug and a teasing grin.

“Oh, come off it,” El says through a huffed sigh. “You are not heartbroken.”

“I just hide it well. You can make it up to me by lending me a book,” Dustin says, winking. He reaches over and taps the duffle bag bouncing against El’s hip. “So, Pep Squad, huh? Gonna prance around Hawkins High in that sad, sorry excuse of a uniform, spreading cheer and pep all around?”

El gives Dustin another flat look. “If they let me on, yes,” she says as they approach her locker. “And, please, like you don’t think that uniform is hot.”

Dustin shrugs nonchalantly and leans against the locker next to El’s as she puts in her combination. “Never said I didn’t,” he says, flashing her a grin. “Bet you’ll look super hot in it.” The words are spoken around a teasing laugh, not meant to be taken entirely seriously. “Hell, I know Mike will think so.”

That gets El’s attention and her hands slips a little as she finally unlocks her locker and unlatches it. “O-oh?” she says, stuttering in time to the beat-skipping thump of her heart. “How, uh, how do you know?” Excitement has her heart racing, her skin tingling, and she pauses mid-opening of her locker as she eagerly awaits Dustin’s response.

“Oh, please,” Dustin says and it’s his turn to give her a flat, knowing look. “You’d have to be blind not to see the way he looks at you. And you’re no better!” Dustin emphasizes his point with a literal point, his index finger jabbing in her direction. “Your goo-goo eyes are not at all subtle, missy.”

At that, El smirks, feeling like the cat who got the cream. “They weren’t meant to be,” she says, eyebrows arching, heavy with meaning. Giddiness has infused her – oh god, does he really like me? – and she can’t tamp down on it now.


El shrugs, feeling coy. “Well, I’m still getting to know him,” she says, not quite willing to reveal the depths of the crush she has, the one that only seems to get deeper each time she looks at him. But there’s absolutely no harm in letting Dustin know that she thinks. “He’s super cute, though.” She holds up a hand the very next second, a bid for a favor. “Please don’t tell Mike, though. We’re still getting to know each other and I want-”

“Things to progress at their natural pace,” Dustin says, cutting her off. “Don’t worry, totally get it, my lips are sealed.” He mimes zipping up his lips and turning the key to lock them – quite a feat considering that he’s smiling like a loon. “The school’s gonna flip though. Like ‘Beauty and the Nerd’? Totally unheard of.”

“Ugh, Dustin,” El says through a heavy, groaning sigh, rolling her eyes as she finally opens her locker. God, she couldn’t care less what anyone in the school might think of her and Mike, no matter what or if anything happens between the two of them. “Please, stop.”

Dustin snickers. “Ok, sorry, sorry. I-” A brief pause, the sound of something fluttering. “Oh, hey, this fell out of your locker.” El looks over just as Dustin bends over to grab what ever hit the floor. “I, uh, think this is for you,” he says as he straightens. “It has your name on it. I think. Is this how it’s spelled?”
El frowns, brow furrowing just a bit, too many questions swirling around in her head. She takes the piece of paper Dustin’s holding out to her, pinched delicately between her fingers.

It’s a piece of thick, stationary paper, soft green and folded in quarters. And, sure enough, it has her name on it... kind of (spelled “Elle” not “El”, so points taken away right off the bat, whoever it’s from). “No, my name’s spelled ‘E-L’,” she murmurs before she begins to investigate.

El brings the note closer and starts to unfold it so she can see what’s written on it, if anything. And, the moment she does, she almost falls over backwards from the stench emanating from it, she reels so hard. “Oh my god, was this thing drenched in Axe Body spray?” El holds out the offensive piece of paper, now torn between curiosity and self-preservation.

Dustin leans in and draws in a good whiff through his nose, coughing almost the moment the air enters his lungs. “Holy shit, that should be classified as a weapon of war,” he says, voice tight, blinking rapidly like he’s trying to clear the fumes from his eyes as he leans back.

“Ugh, seriously.” Curiosity wins out in the end, just edging out that self-preservation instinct (curse her need to know) and, making sure to keep the offensive note at arm’s length, El finishes unfolding it.

The handwriting inside is very stereotypically male, blocky letters and upper and lowercase almost impossible to tell apart. El skims through the text – “Dear Elle... sorry about last week... so beautiful you drive me crazy... let me make it up to you... you name the time and place....” – and jumps to the bottom to see who signed it.

Zach Mercer.

Oh, fuck no.

Revulsion ripples through her and El hurries to fold the note back up. “Wait, who’s it from? What’s it say?” Dustin asks, all need-to-know curiosity.

“An idiot who won’t take a hint despite being hit with it like a clue-by-4,” El grumbles as she begins tearing the note into tiny, tiny pieces. She can feel the expression on her face – nose wrinkled, brows drawn together, lips pinched – and she knows she’s broadcasting her anger, her frustration.

Because fuck-boy will not get a goddamn clue.

“Watch my open locker, Dustin,” El tells him before she marches down the row of lockers to where there’s a trashcan. By this point, she’s ripped up the note into handfuls of small pieces, words indistinguishable. Yeah, she’s going to have to heavily wash her hands to get rid of the Axe body spray residue on her her palms, but the act of shredding this note was just too cathartic.

She slams the pieces into the trash (or as best as one can with what is essentially large pieces of confetti) and makes her way back to where Dustin is still standing by her open locker, looking at her both like he’s scared of what she might do next and like he’s in awe of her at the same time. “Thank you,” she says, voice pitching high with prim satisfaction, as she pulls her duffle bag up over her shoulder and shoves it in her locker.

“Woah,” Dustin breathes. “Remind me to tell Mike to never write you love letters.”

The thought of Mike writing her love letters breaks through the cloud of anger and annoyance just enough to pierce her in the heart, leaving her feeling all fluttery – she would never, ever hate getting anything hand-written from him. Ever – but the thought doesn’t dispel El’s bad mood entirely. She
sighs, closing her locker, and turns to start heading to Homeroom. “It’s not the what, it’s the who it’s from I have a problem with,” El says.

“Who, um, who is it from, by the way?” Dustin asks, glancing down and over at her as they walk.

El resists the urge to ball her fists at her side and, instead, she loops her thumbs in the straps of her backpack. “Zach Mercer.” And if her voice is terse and she all but spits out Zach’s name? Well, she’s still incredibly pissed off, so it’s warranted.

A sharp gasp leaves Dustin. “Wait, you mean star football player, Zach Mercer?” he asks. “Like, the guy every girl in school lusts after?”

“Not this girl,” El says with a snort. “Not even if he was the last person on Earth. Never has a guy been the complete and utter opposite of my type. He’s a crude, entitled dickwad and if he fell off the face of the planet, I wouldn’t care. In fact, I might throw a party.” God, no guy has ever pissed her off as much as Zach has and the thought of being alone in a room with him makes her wanna be sick.

“Huh, so guess your type really is tall, lanky, and nerdy, isn’t it?” Dustin says, gently teasing, like he’s trying to pull El back from the ledge of her anger.

“Pretty much exactly my type,” El says as they walk through the door into their Homeroom classroom with a minute to go. El spares a glance at the back of the room where Jennifer is sitting and gives the other girl a wave, which is returned with at least twice the energy El gave.

“Good to know,” Dustin says with a low laugh. “Also, for reals, remind me never to piss you off. You’re seriously scary when you’re angry.”

“My dad will be proud to hear it,” El says with a laugh, feeling her anger dissipate under Dustin’s light-hearted teasing, and takes her usual seat with Dustin sitting to her right.

“Figures. Sounds just like something a Police Chief would be proud of,” Dustin says, gaze twinkling as he looks over at her.

“Damn straight it is,” El says.

Mr. Evans walks in through the open door just as the bell rings and all over conversation is cut short as Homeroom gets underway.

The morning continues on, El’s foul mood doesn’t go away completely. Every so often, throughout Homeroom and into American Lit, El’s mind touches on the memory of the letter, like it’s a ghost that’s haunting her like the lingering smell of Axe body spray on her hands. And each time, a fresh wave of revulsion washes over her, pairing all too well with the low flame of anger that burns in her belly.

God, just imagine thinking that a stinky, creepy ass note stuffed in her locker could at all make up for practically assaulting her in the hallway last week. Like, of all the douchebro things El figures she could expect from someone like Zach, this one takes the cake, really truly does. Especially because El’s told him she’s not interested and he either can’t take a hint… or doesn’t want to. And neither option is good. One is creepy and the other is downright sociopathic.

*No thank you. Swipe left. Opt the fuck out.*

But then, second period ends and turns into third period. Which means Honors Trig.
Suddenly, it’s like Zach and the note he left her are an insignificant blip on the radar, nothing even worth worrying about. No, just the knowledge that El’s about to get to sit next to Mike for the next hour has her mood doing a complete 180, going from surly to lovesick practically from one breath to the next.

El all but races to her Honors Trig class, a skip in her step, feeling buoyant and giddy and excited. Once again, she pauses just outside the doorway, taking a breathless moment to make sure that nothing is out of place and everything is perfect – hair still smooth, skirt and sweater unwrinkled and lying exactly where they need to – before she walks in, beyond ready to see Mike again.

Only, it appears she raced over too quickly because when El steps in to Trig, her gaze lands on Mike’s empty seat. El stops in the doorway, shoulders slumping a bit. Oh, he’s not even here yet. Boo. El’s lips twist in a small pout and she walks over to her usual desk, excitement dampened just a bit.

She chides herself for getting all worked up as she sits down, backpack sliding gracelessly off her shoulders so she can plop it on the ground. He’ll be here in a sec, El says, reassuring herself. If you hadn’t fucking run over, you wouldn’t be this disappointed. Get a grip, Hopper. But there’s no rationalizing with the lovesick corner of her heart, which is desperately eager to see the boy who makes her feel all fluttery and floaty. El breathes out a low laugh and shakes her head at her own boy-crazy mind (well, not boy-crazy – mike-crazy) before she reaches into her backpack for the stuff she needs for class.

She loses track of time a bit as she skims over the homework that’s due in just a few minutes, making sure all her answers are correct and legible. She’s so absorbed, caught up in a brief, determined frenzy, that she initially misses Mike walking into the room. In fact, it’s only when she sees movement passing in front of her desk out of the top of her vision that she realizes he’s here, and her heart leaps up into her throat. El draws in a stuttering breath before she lifts her gaze off her paper, looking up (and up) to see Mike rounding her desk to sit at his own, long legs folding as he slides into his seat.

El shamelessly watches him the entire time, chin cupped in her hand as her elbow sits propped on the surface of her desk. She’s aware that there’s probably a dreamy smile stretched across her lips, but she doesn’t care. Not when Mike is this cute, all tousled, messy hair and alabaster skin and sharp, defined features. He’s like a work of art she never wants to look away from.

And, if what Dustin hinted at is correct, he likes her.

El doesn’t say anything as she watches Mike get out his stuff for class – he’ll notice her soon enough, she figures and, if not, she’ll wait until he’s settled before getting his attention.

But, he does notice her, going still for a moment, hands hovering above the notebook he just plopped down on his desk, before he looks over, eyes wide and lips parted just barely in confused shock. There’s a wariness around the edges of his gaze that has El’s heart going out to him, that makes her want to give him a hug and tell him that everything will be ok and no one will ever hurt him again. (And if she ever finds out who put that look in his eyes, there’s going to be hell to pay, mark her words.)

So, El gives Mike a gentle smile, head tilting just so as her arm lies flat on the desk. “Hi, there,” she
says, voice lilting with barely contained flirtiness. God, it’s so even she can hear it, that’s how blatant it is.

Mike breathes out a laugh, the wariness in his eyes fading away as amusement takes its place. “Hi,” he says back, shy smile curling up the gorgeous fullness of his lips.

“Fancy seeing you here,” El says with a bit of a giggle.

“We have this class together every day,” Mike deadpans, but his eyebrow arches, amused.

El lets out a playful groan and reaches over to smack him lightly on the arm, heart skipping a beat as she so very briefly feels the warmth of him beneath her palm. “Hey. I’m trying to be cute over here. Why are you trying to stop me from being cute?” She emphasizes her point by fluttering her eyelashes and pouting at him, pouring it on thick.

“I don’t think anything could stop you from being cute,” Mike blurts out. He freezes a second later, like it’s just hit him what he’s said, and a fierce blush blossoms high on his cheeks. “Oh, um, I mean – I didn’t–”

El’s breath catches in her throat – oh god, did he just call her cute?? – and her heart starts racing a mile a minute, pulse fluttering like a hummingbird’s just beneath her skin. She giggles, then, all coy, thrilled beyond measure that the boy she likes thinks she’s cute. “Well, I would say the same about you, if it makes you feel any better,” she says. She’s totally aware of how breathy she sounds, flirtatious and overwhelmed, but there’s nothing she can do to stop it. Nor can she stop the playful wink she tosses in his direction.

Mike stares at her and the only way she can describe the look on his face is gobsmacked, like he can’t believe that she called him cute in the same round-about way he did to her. It makes her giggle, heart feeling like it’s going to explode from the force of the butterflies beating frantically in her veins, and El cannot stop smiling. How could she when Mike looks absolutely adorable right now? The cutest blush she’s ever seen creeps across his cheeks, his mouth hangs open just so (which just makes her want to kiss him so bad), and the look in his eyes is both pleased and surprised in a way that makes her stomach swoop.

Mike’s mouth works a couple of times, like he’s trying to think of something to say or get the words out where they might be stuck in his throat. But, before he can manage, the bell rings and class begins, cutting him off short.

El glances over briefly as Ms. Geno stands up from her desk to begin lecturing, but her gaze inexorably slides back over to Mike.

Mike is still looking at her, gaze still pleased, still surprised – an intoxicating mix that makes El’s heart skip and her breath catch in her throat. But there’s also uncertainty there, now, that wasn’t there before. Like he’s not sure if she meant what she said, like she might have lied to him about finding him cute.

Well, that just won’t do, El thinks. So she smiles at him, holding nothing back. She can feel it: the coy, flirty twist of her lips; the knowing arch of her eyebrow; how every inch of her gaze is filled with all the things she feels for him, all the happiness and affection and attraction. Sure, she may have only known him a week, she may not know much about him, but she wants to know everything about him. Everything.

El lets him know all of this with one lingering look and it’s all too easy to let everything coursing through her show on her face. Mike stares back at her, wide eyed, breathless and frozen, like shock
has transformed him into marble, like he can’t believe any of this is happening.

A giggle bubbles up in El’s throat and she manages to push it down, but her lips twitch with the effort, adding another layer to her smile. She throws Mike one more wink, this one saucier than the last, before she turns to pay attention to Ms. Geno. Or, as well as she can pay attention at any rate, given how her pulse thumps beneath her skin and how she feels so airy and weightless, it’s honestly shocking she doesn’t just float away and untether from gravity entirely.

All throughout Trig, El can feel Mike’s gaze half on her, like he’s trying to pay attention in class, but also can’t stop paying attention to her. It’s no surprise, really, given how blatantly forward and open her flirtations with him have been this morning.

And El honestly had been trying to be more subtle, less in his face about it. But hearing from Dustin and from Mike (in a round-about manner, of course) that he thinks she’s cute has made her throw all caution to the wind and she doesn’t care about being subtle anymore. No, if he thinks she’s cute, then El wants Mike to know that she thinks he’s cute right back. No sense in wasting time, right?

Still, Mike seems unsettled and the nervous energy he’s radiating is palpable. It’s a good, if frustrating, reminder that Mike’s emotions are fragile (for reasons that El still has no idea about) and she needs to have some restraint, needs to have some care with this beautiful boy’s heart.

But, that doesn’t mean she still can’t flirt with him. Nope, not at all.

Halfway through class, feeling giddily daring when she feels Mike’s eyes on her once more, El crosses one leg over the other and daintily perches her elbows on the desk. She leans forward, chin resting just so on the back of her fingers, and when Ms. Geno isn’t looking, El turns her head just enough so she can look over at Mike.

He’s staring back at her, of course, but he’s not looking at her face. No, his gaze is fixed firmly on her legs, her right crossed over her left, and she feels his eyes on her like a physical caress. His eyes, she doesn’t mind on her. Not when he’s looking at her with an expression that is somewhere between awe and attraction, soft and cherished and heated.

As El watches, Mike’s gaze drifts up from her legs and El holds the pose she’s in, loving how this feels, loving how just the simple act of him checking her out makes her feel all warm and gooey inside, heart racing and skin tingling with excitement.

Eventually, his gaze meets hers and he startles a bit, not expecting her to be looking. A flush crawls up his cheeks – one of embarrassment this time, gaze filling with shame that wars with the naked attraction in his eyes – but he somehow manages to mostly not look away, whether out of some newfound sense of bravery or frozen with shock, El’s not sure.

El doesn’t let him linger in his shame for long. Hell, she wouldn’t have positioned herself like this if she didn’t want him to look. So, making sure his gaze is locked on her face, she smiles, the curve of her lips teasing and knowing – like what you see?

She holds his gaze for just a second longer before she turns back to face the front of the class, legs slowly uncrossing so she can hook her ankles together beneath her seat. Her lips are still pulled up in a smile, though now it’s more out of a sense of victory than anything else.

El almost wishes she was alone right now. Because she desperately wants to get up and do a victory dance, wants to squeal and giggle and explode with giddy happiness. Her heart’s racing, her skin’s tingling, and her stomach is doing acrobatics that are spurred on by the millions of butterflies that have taken flight in her belly.
But she holds it all in, somehow manages to contain the happiness that wants to explode out of her, and refocuses her energy on paying attention to the last half of Trig.

Ms. Geno runs over her time, continuing past the ringing of the bell for a couple of minutes. So there’s no time really for El to talk to Mike at all as she rushes to gather up her things since she has to make it almost to the other side of campus for French class.

But, there’s still time, at least, to say goodbye… or, rather, until next time.

El stands up, notebook and math text held in her arms, and looks over at Mike as she slips her backpack onto her shoulders one arm at at time. She waits until he looks back over, eyes wide once again, curious and hopeful and fearful all in one expression.

El giggles – because how can she not when he’s this goddamn cute? – and she smiles, trilling the fingers of one hand in a flirty wave. “See you later, cutie,” she says, voice low and lilting, and she barely resists the urge to blow a kiss at him as she turns and walks away, leaving with her Mike’s shocked face as the last image of him she’ll see until lunch at the earliest.

El can feel Mike’s eyes on her as she walks out the door, the skin along the back of her neck and her spine tingling like earlier that morning when she walked off to Homeroom with Dustin.

And, if there’s an extra sway in her hips, knowing that he’s watching her as she walks away, El doesn’t mind one bit.

It is for him, after all.

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See you later, cutie.

The words echo in his head, over and over and over again. It’s like they’ve wormed their way into the soft tissue and have etched themselves permanently on his soul, on the very fiber of his being.

The entire time he’s sitting in Spanish class, Mike’s barely paying attention. No, he’s too busy trying to decipher what in the hell El meant by that.

Does she think he’s cute? Like for real think he’s cute? Or is she just leading him on, snaring him in her web so she can destroy him later?

It’s so annoying because he doesn’t know which it is, but he hopes so badly that it’s that she really thinks he’s cute.

And, the most perplexing thing of all is that there’s honestly part of him that thinks El might actually mean it. Especially if the way she kept looking at him all throughout Trig is any indication.

He’d barely been able to keep it together from the moment he spotted El sitting at her desk to the moment she disappeared through the doorway on her way to her next class. He couldn’t help it – she’s just so effortlessly alluring, transcendentally beautiful. Sitting there, strands of her ponytail twirled around one finger as she looked at the papers on her desk, the demure cross of her legs at mid-calf at odds with the tempting vision of those same legs encased in white, thigh-high socks.

Almost more than El’s disarming smile and warm, flirty gazes, those damn socks distracted him practically the entire time he sat there in Trig – those and that band of bare skin around the middle of
her thigh, perfectly and temptingly taunting. He’d nearly stopped breathing when he watched her slowly cross her legs, skirt pulling taut around her thigh, the hook of her right knee over her left so fucking suggestive, Mike’s heart nearly pounded its way out of his chest. He couldn’t help it, then, the way his gaze dragged up her body, like he was trying to commit the sight of her to memory.

Up and up his eyes traveled, up the smooth curve of her legs, mouth going dry at the tilt of her hips and the arch of her back as she sat with her elbows propped up on the desk. Mike drank it all in, unable to look away, gaze drawn to the lines of her torso, the way the hair of her ponytail spilled down her back in a lush waterfall, the delectable curve where her neck meets her shoulder….

And then his eyes rose to her face and Mike discovered that El was looking right at him.

To say that he was startled would be a massive understatement. Embarrassment started to build up inside of him, bubbling over and souring his stomach. Of fucking course he’d get caught checking her out like a skeezy, pervy loser, like she’s just a piece of meat instead of a beautiful, intelligent young woman.

He’d frozen, unable to look away despite how much he desperately wanted to slink away, find a hole to crawl into so he could die in peace. But, no, he’d been god and truly stuck, held in place by the combination of El’s inscrutable gaze and the arresting tug of war between his testosterone-fueled hormones and basic human decency (because god dammit she’s hot even if he shouldn’t be checking her out so openly during class).

But, then, she’d smiled. Oh, how El smiled. And, in that moment, Mike Wheeler practically forgot his fucking name.

El’s smile had been so many things: excited, happy, teasing…. But, most of all, it’d been knowing. It was a smile that said she knew exactly what she was doing to him, that she wanted him to stare at her like he was, that she’d posed herself specifically to catch his eye and that it’d worked exactly how she wanted it to.

Pride filled her expression as she turned back to the front of the classroom a moment later, but Mike had still been stuck on El.

Wait, she wanted him to look at her? Why? Did it have to do with her thinking him cute? Or was it part of a game, one he wasn’t entirely sure was real, despite how every logical brain cell told him there was no other explanation. After all, girls as hot as El didn’t fucking strike a pose for guys like Mike, no matter how many fantasies revolved around that.

Mike spent the rest of class off kilter, but the worst (or best?) of it had yet to happen.

And so, with a simple, inviting utterance of “See you later, cutie,” spoken in the most breathless honeyed tones Mike had ever heard, El Hopper broke his brain entirely.

It’s all he can think about, those four little words bouncing around in his skull over and over again, back and forth like a pinball. And each time it bounces, it strikes off a thought every time, thoughts that taunt him with visions of what he so desperately wants.

See you later, cutie – walking through the halls at school, hand in hand, her palm soft and warm against his, their fingers intertwined.

See you later, cutie – the brightness of her smile as he picks her up to take her out on a date, beautiful and iridescent and made only for him.

See you later, cutie – her mouth against his as he kisses her soft and slow, lips parting just so as they
glide against his, lush and inviting and so, so hot. His hands in her hair, strands like silk through his fingers. Her body pressed up against his, lithe and warm and perfect….

Yeah, no, Mike’s brain is irrevocably broken and it’s all El’s fault.

Lunch just makes it worse. Like the universe is out to taunt him, Mike has a clear, unimpeded view of where El’s sitting with the rest of the popular girls.

She’s just so… beautiful, Mike thinks with a soft sigh. El’s sitting there, talking to Jennifer Hayes, all sparkling eyes and gently flushed cheeks as she giggles and smiles. Mike wants to hate how he can’t bring himself to look away, but his heart (and his hormones) are far too ensnared to care.

That same heart, though, shrivels in on itself when, with only 10 minutes left in the lunch hour, Ashley Patterson slides into view, switching seats with Ellen Kinkaid so she can sit next to El.

A strange mix of nausea and hurt washes over Mike. It’s, well, odd to see his current object of affection and infatuation sitting next to his previous one. And, despite the hurt tugging at his heart, Mike forces himself to look as Ashley.

She’s not paying attention to him as she talks with El – she never really paid attention to him unless she wanted something from him – but that just gives Mike the luxury of staring at the girl who broke his heart at the end of Freshman year.

Ashley had led him on, used him while she strung him along, and then humiliated him when she’d gotten what she wanted out of him. And here he was, almost a year and a half later, and the scars on his heart still felt too fresh.

Mike wonders if Ashley’s told El any of what she did to him. If she remembers, that is, Mike thinks, brow furrowing in a scowl. Given how Ashley never even so much as looked in Mike’s direction Sophomore year, it’s pretty safe to say she dropped him like yesterday’s trash, insignificant and completely unmemorable. So the odds of El knowing anything about what happened with him and Ashley are super slim to none.

Still, that doesn’t stop the weirdest combination of hope and shame from creeping through his veins – hope that El doesn’t know about his horrible history with Ashley, shame that he’s still so hung up on this. Mike shakes himself loose as best he can so he can focus on his friends, needing any kind of distraction from the pained thumping of his heart.

He looks around the table, blinking lazily. Will has his nose buried in a book– the same one El lent him, actually – and Dustin and Lucas are speaking in heated, if hushed tones about their plans for the Destiny raid the Party is planning on tackling on Saturday.

“All I’m saying, Lucas, is that if our Light Level isn’t at least 550, we’re gonna get our asses kicked. And, last I recall, you’re the only one of the Party whose score isn’t that high. Even Max’s score is up there and I’m sure she manages to pull herself away from sucking face long enough to keep leveling up.”

Lucas scowls and Mike can see the “fuck you” on his friend’s face in the narrowed eyes and pinched lips. But, before he can say it, Lucas looks over and gives Mike a wry grin. “Well, well, well… Wheeler finally joins us for lunch. You finished staring at the hot new girl?”

Mike mirrors Lucas’ earlier scowl and sidesteps the question by ignoring it entirely. “So, are you going to be ready for the raid this weekend? We can’t have a weak link, you know.”

“Oh, fuck you. Fuck you, both,” Lucas grumbles, eyeing both Mike and Dustin with a sour eye. “I’ll
be ready. I always manage to perform, don’t I?”

Dustin grins, full of impish mischief. “Hey, keep those details of your sex life to yourself, ok? We don’t need to know what you and Max get up to behind closed doors.”

Lucas lets free a frustrated groan and tosses his napkin at Dustin, who’s laughing alongside Mike the whole time (and Will’s still wrapped up in his borrowed book, completely oblivious to what’s going on at the table around him). “I hate you both,” Lucas grumbles. “And at least I’m getting some, unlike some people at this table.”

The conversation goes on like this for the rest of the lunch period, all shit talking back-and-forth, and Mike lets himself get lost in it as he finishes scarfing down his lunch. But, even so, when the bell rings, Mike lets his gaze slide over to the table where El was sitting. Only to discover that both she and Jennifer Hayes slipped away when Mike wasn’t looking. Mike frowns as he stands up, tray in one hand, backpack strap looped around the other. Man, how’d he miss that?

But, there’s not much Mike can do about, now can he?

He exits the cafeteria with the Party, hanging back with Will as Dustin and Lucas continue to bicker, and Mike nudges Will with his elbow as they walk, watching the shorter boy as he twists to put the book he borrowed from El back in his backpack. “Good book?”

Will gives him a toothy grin, just a few notches shy of manically excited. “Oh my god, it’s so good,” he says, all giddy. “Mike, you’d love this book, honestly. You should ask El if you can borrow it after I’m finished with it.”

The idea of asking El as something simple as borrowing a book manages to bring a blush to Mike’s cheeks and what he has to say gets stuck in his throat for a bit before he manages to force the words out. “Yeah, maybe,” Mike says, throat still thick. “I’m not friends with her like you are, though.” Not that he’s jealous, though. Not at all.

Will rolls his eyes, a humorless laugh drifting out from between his lips. “I wouldn’t call us friends quite yet. Becoming friends, probably, is more like it.” Will gives Mike a look. “Still, I’m sure she’d gladly lend you the book if you asked. You wouldn’t even have to ask nicely.”

“What does that mean?” Mike asks as he looks over at Will, eyes narrowed.

A look passes over Will’s face – a withering flutter of his eyelids, lips pursed – before it fades, leaving a maddeningly placid, teasing look in its place. “Well, if you can’t figure it out, I’m not going to spoil it for you.”

Mike grumbles as he gives Will the finger. “Fine, be that way, asshole. I’m heading off to History. Catch you losers later.”

The sound of the others’ friendly, teasing laughter follows Mike down the hall as he heads to US History, making only a quick stop at his locker to grab the brick that is his US History textbook.

He’s only a few steps away from his locker when, for the second time that day, Mike hears El’s voice calling out in his direction. Only, this time, she’s not calling out for Will.

No, this time, El’s calling out for him.

“Mike, hey, wait up!”
A shiver runs down Mike’s spine at the sound of El calling out his name – loud and proud, like she doesn’t care if anyone hears her acknowledging his existence. It had been the same that morning, when she easily and casually approached the Party to lend Will the book he’s now reading. People had given her strange looks – most people didn’t acknowledge the Party’s existence, much less girls like El – but El had either been completely oblivious or had no fucks to give.

And, given how smart El is, Mike’s starting to think it’s the latter as he stops in the hallway, bracing himself to be swept away by her sheer presence. He hears echoes of El’s earlier parting in his head – see you later, cutie – and Mike gulps. He wonders if El remembers that she called him ‘cutie’ not two hours ago, or if she’s acknowledge it.

For a moment, though, all questions completely fly out of his head as Mike looks at El and is immediately rendered breathless at the sight of the most beautiful girl he’s ever seen. God, staring at her is like staring at the sun, bright and sparkling and blinding, but he can’t look away. Not when she’s smiling at him, open and gorgeous, almost ethereal.

And then, as she catches up, she very obviously and very deliberately gives him a once over, gaze dragging down and then back up, full of appraisal and... god, is that attraction? El’s eyes are full of heat and, dare Mike say it, want, enough so that even he notices.

Holy shit, El Hopper is checking him out. And she likes what she sees.

Guess she didn’t forget about the ‘cutie’ remark after all.

Mike gulps again and tries to smile, but it feels too shaky to be truly called that. “Um, El, hi,” he manages to get out, feeling too much like someone has filled his mouth with marbles, he’s so mealy-mouthed.

El’s smile takes on a teasing edge, one that sets his heart racing at warp speed. “Thought I would never catch up to you. You walk pretty fast.”

Mike blushes. “Plus, y’know, long legs,” he says, trying to deflect for who knows what reason.

El’s grin only gets wider. “I noticed. You’re, like, one of the tallest guys in this school.” She pauses, looking positively impish. “I like it.”

The stuttering flip his heart gives feels like it nearly fucking kills him and it takes Mike a moment to even dredge up the barest, lamest response ever. “Um, thanks?”

El giggles, very obviously amused, as they start walking down the hall by some unspoken agreement. “Oh, you’re very welcome,” she says, tittering a bit and it makes Mike feel buoyant.

Mike can’t keep his eyes off of her as they head to class. It feels surreal, having her next to him. Like it’s some kind of dream where it’s nothing at all to look over and see her right there.

If he focuses hard enough, he can feel her next to him – the soft aura of the heat of her body, the faint floral hint of her shampoo. And every few steps, her arm brushes against his, too haphazard to be planned, but El does nothing to stop it from happening, so Mike figures she at least doesn’t hate it.

But there’s a silence growing between them and Mike knows if he doesn’t consciously fill it, his heart will spew out something awkward for sure. So, he clears his throat and glances over at El out of the corner of his eye. “So, uh, you’re trying out for Pep Squad? Did I hear that right?”

The smile that El shines his way is beaming, it’s so ecstatic. “You heard it right!” she practically chirps. “Tryouts are after school today and I’m excited.”
“I’m sensing there’s a ‘but’, though,” Mike says. He doesn’t know how he knows, but there’s something in El’s words that is a little too forced.

El’s smile dims – not a lot, but enough to let Mike know that he was right. “I’m nervous,” she says. She’s looking up at him like she’s telling a secret meant for his ears only: wide eyes, lower lip pulled between her teeth, forehead furrowed just enough between her brows. “Pep Squad is always something of a popularity contest and I’m coming into this mid-game, so to speak and-”

“Hey,” Mike says forcefully, cutting El off before her worry can turn into full-blown panic. “You’ll be great, I have no doubt. Besides, you’re, like the most popular girl in school and all, what with being the new girl from the big city.” It, again, begs the question of why she’s even talking to him in the first place, then. He’s very clearly not anywhere near as popular as she is, and yet, from everything Mike can tell, El looks like there’s nowhere she’d rather be than walking to class with him and talking with him about Pep Squad tryouts.

El looks over at him and her gaze shines with the sweetest relief. Mike’s heart feels like it’s about to explode as it thumps madly in his chest.

(he’s not aware of it, but this is the moment he falls in love with her. the sweetness of her gaze, the gentle warmth of her face, the way she shows no hesitation in letting him know that his words have made her feel better. there’s nothing Mike likes more than knowing he’s helped someone and that he can help someone as beautiful and self-assured as El makes him feel like the biggest hero on the face of the planet.)

“Thanks, Mike. You’re so sweet,” El says, words dipped in honey, irresistibly soft in a way that makes Mike yearn like he never has before. He wants to hear that voice murmur sweet nothings, wants to hear it talk about everything and nothing for hours on end. It’s the most beautiful sound in the world, El’s voice, and he can’t stop wanting more.

Mike feels his cheeks heat up – curse being so pale – and he desperately wishes he wasn’t such a lame loser, blushing at the simplest of compliments. Other guys would be able to play it cool, Wheeler, for fuck’s sake. “Just telling the truth,” he manages to croak out.

“Still,” El says. “Most guys would be reassuring me I’d get in because they think I’ll look hot in the uniform.”

The words make Mike choke on his own breath as they walk into their US History classroom and approach their desks. Oh god, now he’s picturing her in the uniform. And he’s already having a hard time keeping his eyes off her legs today with the skirt-and-thigh-high combination she’s got going on.

Picturing El in the Pep Squad uniform – short skirt, tight tank top, just miles and miles of bare skin for him to drool over – while looking at her dressed in the sexiest version of demure school girl completely short circuits Mike’s entire brain. “You’ll look hot, too,” he blurts out, mouth working on auto-pilot, as he turns around from setting his stuff down to look at her. Mike hears the words that came out of his mouth, but he can’t quite believe he fucking said them and the blush on his face, which had been starting to fade, comes roaring back to life.

Even worse, El hears him too and she freezes mid-way through taking her backpack off (mike wishes she would keep going because she’s standing there with her shoulders pulled back, which only pulls her sweater taut against the curves of her chest and goddamnit he’s not strong enough not to look). She stares back at him, an incredulous look spread across her gorgeous face. A beat later, El resumes the process of sitting down at her desk and Mike follows suit. “You know, that’s the second time today you’ve complimented my looks,” she says, smiling at him, wide and pleased. “Might make a
For a moment, Mike’s totally and completely enchanted by the flush on El’s cheeks – pink and so, so cute – and the lilting tease of her voice makes him feel all light and tingly. He’s surprised he manages to set his stuff down and sit in his seat without incident because he cannot tear his gaze away from her. No, she’s the only thing he ever wants to look at for the rest of his life.

But, once he fully registers El’s words, embarrassment crests inside of him until he has to duck his gaze, fingers trembling a bit as he wrestles his notebook out of his backpack. “Oh, uh, is that right?” he says, trying to deflect once more, praying to whatever higher power might be watching that she doesn’t push this right now. Because if she does, Mike’s not entirely sure he won’t be able to keep from gushing about how pretty he thinks he is, how much he’s attracted to her.

Luckily, something heard his prayers, because El throws him a teasing, knowing smile and says, “Hmm, I’ll let you off easily this time, Wheeler.”

Mike starts to sigh, but it strangles in his throat when she winks at him a moment later and, goddamnmit, it’s too much – she’s too much. El overwhelms him completely, rendering him unable to think straight. Worse, he doesn’t care.

Mike doesn’t care when he can only half pay attention in class with her sitting next to him, gaze half glued to length of her legs or smooth richness of her hair (or the curve of her neck where it meets her jaw, lips aching to know how the softness of her skin feels like beneath them, and god he knows his mouth would just fit there perfectly). Or later when he can barely make it through A/V Club after Dustin, who arrives 10 minutes late because he was too busy watching the Pep Squad, confirms that El is indeed at tryouts and that she “looks amazing, Michael. Seriously, if you wanna go watch, I wouldn’t blame you. I think the key word is ‘limber’.”

Mike doesn’t care how distracting it is when, over the next three nights without fail, he dreams about El – dreams of her wearing those thigh-high socks (and nothing else), dreams of her in the Pep Squad uniform as she looks at him all come hither with a slow, seductive crook of her finger. Dreams that leave him wanting, leave him feeling frustrated and stretched thin like his skin is two sizes too small. Dream that make it all but impossible to look at El in the face in the light of day without remembering the images his sleeping mind teases him with.

(and yet, he doesn’t at all regret the dreams or the fantasies – doesn’t, can’t regret thinking about her this way. she’s beautiful and gorgeous and so damn attractive and he’s only human, only a 16-year old boy with raging hormones that he has a hard time keeping under control when he’s alone with his thoughts. it’s just concerning that she’s rapidly becoming the only star of those dreams and fantasies and not one of a rotating cast like normal. but that’s a different issue for a different day.)

Mike doesn’t care that he gets jealous when he hears that El got a spot on Pep Squad from Will when she announced it during another dinner her dad and his mom arranged, at El’s house instead of Will’s this time. Doesn’t care that he hates that it’s Will who gets to spend all this time with El instead of him, even though there’s no reason for Mike to have the kind of familial connection with El like Will does (after all his parents aren’t friends with El’s dad, not like Mrs. Byers is). Doesn’t care for the way his stomach twists horribly when he hears that El and Will have exchanged cell phone numbers and are starting to text each other back and forth on a regular basis.

Mike doesn’t care about any of this which is a shame because he wants to care. He wants to rant and rage at himself for starting to fall like this again, for caring so hard what this girl thinks about him, this girl who will probably only break his heart. He wants to figure out a way to keep his heart from getting hopelessly entangled in a way that will only hurt him so badly when reality comes crashing
down around him like it always does (because he can never be happy, can never have nice things – no, that kind of luck isn’t in the cards for someone like him).

But it’s hard to even dredge up the inklings of the ability to care when Mike spends most of the week in anxious agony. Because the first Pep Rally of the year is on Thursday afternoon in anticipation for the Football game on Friday night – there are signs posted all over school. On days when there are Pep Rallies, all the girls on the squad come to school dressed in uniform. And all Mike can think whenever he sees one of those damn flyers, and especially after he finds out that El got on the squad, is El at school dressed in that uniform.

Mike wakes up on Thursday a nervous, anxious, excited mess. All night, it felt like, he dreamed of El, unable to stop imagining her dressed in that damn uniform (one he swears he never paid much attention to before). It’d been like a sword of damocles over his head, a taunting reminder that, in a matter of hours, what’s just been confined to his imagination is going to be his reality.

And he’s so not ready.

Somehow, during the first few hours of school on Thursday, Mike manages to not see El at all and, as disappointed as he actually is, he’s also very relieved. He just knows the moment he sees her, that’ll be it for him for the day, that it’ll ruin any chance he has at concentrating at all in his classes.

It’s bad enough that he’s seen other girls from Pep Squad wandering around campus and through the halls and Mike’s aware, like he’s never been before, just how revealing those uniforms are: skirts that it would be way too generous to say come down to mid-thigh with slits on one side that just reveals even more of their legs; tight tank-tops that do nothing to hide the curves of their upper bodies (with some girls rolling them up to expose the thin band of skin of their waists). The only thing “innocent” about those uniforms is the tennis shoes the girls wear and, in Mike’s opinion, it just highlights how distracting the rest of the uniforms actually are.

By the time Mike’s walking into his Trig class, he feels like he’s going to explode from all the nervous anticipation. El isn’t there yet by the time he walks through the door, but he knows there’s only a matter of minutes, at most, to go until she gets there.

Mike sits down and keeps his eyes all but glued to the open doorway so he doesn’t miss the moment El walks into class, wishing the entire time he could just stop obsessing about this. But he can’t and he fucking hates it.

It’s only maybe 20 more seconds until El walks in through the door and Mike stops caring about anything other than her.

Ho. Ly. Shit.

god, her legs are long – have they always been that long? – i wonder what it would feel like to touch them – so pretty – fuck her hair’s so adorable – wow that ponytail and scrunchie are really doing it for me – oh my god those socks are cute – are those little pompoms on them? – fuck though she’s so hot – she’s so hot and she maybe actually likes me and i just–

And then El looks over at him, a rich smile lifting the corners of her lips, and Mike totally and completely falls.

And he doesn’t care at all.
El has to admit, the way Mike’s looking at her right now makes her both swoon and feel like the most powerful woman on the face of the planet. Mike’s looking at her with the most addicting mix of awe and heated attraction and it’s everything El’s ever wanted.

The most delicious shiver runs down El’s spine as she walks over to her desk, her gaze locked on Mike the entire time, and she realizes she always wants Mike to look at her like this. It might be a little selfish, but she’s just never felt this way about anybody before and it makes her feel floaty in the best way possible, like she’s drunk even though she hasn’t had a drop of alcohol.

Mike’s gaze runs up and down her body like he can’t decide what he wants to look at, only that he wants to look at everything and, fuck, El just wants to go over to him and kiss him and never, ever stop.

But that’s really not possible, not the least because they’re in school (never mind that her and Mike aren’t anywhere near the point… if they get to that point). So El just smiles as she sets her backpack down and slides onto her seat. The cool slide of the plastic seat feels like a shock against the bare skin of her thighs and she jumps a little from the temperature.

One of the only downsides to this skirt, if I’m being perfectly honest, El thinks with a mental eye roll. Still, overall, she’s excited to be wearing this uniform. She’d felt pretty good after tryouts on Monday, but actually finding out that she’d gotten on the squad the following afternoon had been the highlight of her day.

The girls are all so nice – at least, they are from what El’s seen of them so far. Partially led by Jennifer, who’s made it to Assistant Captain, they’re all sweet and excited about spreading school cheer. Some of them El’s already started becoming friends with, like Ashley and Ellen, so it’s not like El needs to make all new in-roads with this group of girls.

And, yes, some of them are also excited to have a legitimate excuse to wear a miniskirt to school and have the boys all check them out all day. But El can’t blame them for that. Not when she had similar thoughts that morning as she got dressed in the Pep Squad uniform. Only it’s not “boys” she’s trying to attract.

No, just one boy, singular – the boy who’s currently sitting next to her, staring at her and not even trying to hide it.

Well, fair’s fair, El thinks as she returns the favor. Being just as subtle as Mike (i.e. not at all), she looks him over, letting her gaze linger longer that is strictly necessary. But given how Mike doesn’t seem to mind (at least, not that she can tell, at any rate), El finds that she doesn’t care.

God, she could look at him all day and never get bored. Today, Mike’s wearing black jeans, just on this side of loose fitting, and a simple, red sweater, shallow v-neck show just the barest hint of the hollow of his throat, that space between his collarbones that El desperately wants to explore with her lips and tongue.

His hair is gently disheveled and El knows from watching him over the past week and a half that this is from Mike’s habit of running his fingers through his hair. Every time he does it, the most powerful longing fills her but El doesn’t know what she wants more: to run her fingers through his hair or to have him run his fingers through her hair.

Or both at the same time.

Ooh, both. Both is good.
The thought makes her smile and El flips her ponytail over her shoulder, hair held up high on her head with a green and white striped scrunchie – *Hawkins High colors, everyone.* “Hi, Mike” she says, voice coming out all breathless and flirty. She almost wishes she control that better, but honestly, how is she supposed to keep this from happening when he’s just so *cute?* Especially today when the red of his sweater pairs so nicely with the alabaster of his skin and the gentle flush on his face makes his freckles pop beneath beneath dark, sparkling eyes and El’s just *gone.*

Mike’s blush deepens, like he’s embarrassed over getting caught checking her out – which is just silly because he’s the only guy she *wants* checking her out. “Um, hi,” he says, licking his lips. His gaze darts away for just a second before he seems to find some courage, enough for him to straighten his shoulders and meet her eyes once more. Still, his gaze is a little shy and it makes El’s heart twist in her chest. “Morning, El,” Mike greets in return. “So, uh, how do you like Pep Squad so far?”

Mike told her yesterday that he had found out she’d made it onto the squad from Will (and why Will was sharing her news with other people, El has no idea, but it bothers her that she wasn’t the one who got to tell her news to Mike *herself*). Still, she’d gushed at him about how excited she was for the first practice after school yesterday, the same practice where she got the uniform she’s wearing right now. “I *love* it,” she says through a giggle. “The other girls are all great, Jen and Ashley are there, and today’s pep rally is going to be so awesome.”

Mike flinches, just enough so that El notices, and she wants to know why as her stomach begins to sink a bit. “Sounds great,” he says, a smile on his face that is tight and a little strained.

El wanted to ask him what he thinks of the uniform, what he thinks of it on her, but there’s a building edge of panic rising in his eyes that looks like it’s beginning to war with the heated attraction she can feel whenever he looks at her. Something about her being on the squad is causing this and El’s not sure *what.* So, no, now’s not the time to push. *Another time. Better keep it neutral,* El thinks before she decides to ask a different, but still hopeful question. “So, are you going to be at the rally this afternoon?”

This time, Mike doesn’t just flinch – he full on *cringes,* though out of regret or annoyance, El’s not sure. “Can’t,” he says, tight and clipped. A sigh escapes. “I have Cross Country practice after school.”

“Oh, wow, you do Cross Country?” El asks, leaning full-tilt into her curiosity as she tries her best to push aside her disappointment that Mike won’t be able to go to the rally… though she’s also getting the sense that even if he *were* free, he *still* wouldn’t go. El wants to pretend like that doesn’t hurt, but she’s not that good of an actor.

Unfortunately, though, it doesn’t hit El just how *bad* her question sounded until she sees Mike’s face fall. “Gee, you don’t have to sound so shocked,” he says as a wry, brittle smile crosses his face. “I know I’m a giant nerd and all, but still….”

*Shit, fuck.* El curses herself at the hurt in Mike’s voice and, god, she can see the walls she’s worked so hard to get through over the past week and a half *slamming* back up. Panic rises up in her throat, making her heart feel weak and thin. “No, *god* no. I wasn’t – I just think that it’s neat, is all.” Yes, sure, because *that* sounded convincing. “We didn’t have Cross Country at my old school, so I don’t know much about it.” *Oh, for fuck’s sake, Hopper, this isn’t any better.*

Mike gives her another smile, somewhere between confused and pitying and, though he’s still looking at her like he wants to *keep* looking at her (because he still seems to find her attractive), El wants to hit her head against the surface of her desk. Because, somehow, she just made this fucking *awkward* – got too excited and leapt without looking. Fuck, why doesn’t she ever learn to *think,* sometimes?
“Not much to it,” Mike says with a lazy shrug. “It’s pretty much just long runs in the woods.”

“Still, sounds nice,” El says, trying to salvage something.

But, before she can get any farther, the bell rings and class begins.

El throws Mike a smile, hoping she’s coming across as open and warm and apologetic. But, though Mike smiles back, there’s a distance in his eyes that literally wasn’t there two minutes ago and it makes El want to scream.

God, two steps forward, one step back, it feels like. It’d been going so well all week and now El feels like she’s gone and undone all her hard work. Seriously, she did not at all mean to insinuate that she didn’t think Mike could be athletic in any way, shape, or form, like she’d looked at him and pigeonholed him into the bucket labeled “Nerd” and gave it no further thought when nothing could be further from the truth. She was just excited about finding out a new piece of information… maybe too excited about it.

Still, Mike smiled back at her when she smiled at him and he continues to talk to her before and after the classes they share that day, so not all hope is lost.

It does put a bit of a damper on El’s mood for the rest of the day, though, but she lets herself get caught up in the impending excitement of the pep rally once school is done for the day and she’s heading over to meet the rest of the Squad in the locker room.

As a newer member of the squad, El hasn’t had time to learn more than the little they went over during practice yesterday. So her job is mainly to stand in formation and look pretty while she smiles and echoes the cheers led by the more experienced members of the squad. The energy in the gym is infections, the bleachers packed with students, and El lets herself get swept up in it.

By the end of the rally, El’s back at a mostly even keel. It’s with that mood that she’s determined to move forward with Mike like she has been: not hiding at all that she’s interested in him. She’s determined to write off what happened this morning as a blip, an aberration, something worth forgetting entirely. After all, it’s not like she can go in the past and change it.

Consider it forgotten, she thinks as she heads into the locker room with the squad to clean up after the rally.

A bright giggle approaches her from behind and, before El is fully aware what’s going on, Jennifer glomps onto her, arm linking through hers as she skips next to El. “El, oh my god, wasn’t that great?”

El echoes Jen’s giggle with a laugh of her own, smiling so wide that her cheeks almost hurt. “It was fantastic! Everyone got so into it.”

“God, I know,” Jen says, dramatically swooning as if totally overcome with just how fantastic it was, using her grip on El’s arm to keep up right as they walk. She straightens a second later, giggling with a sigh. “So, how does a pep rally at Hawkins compare to New York?” Jen asks as they trail behind a gaggle of other girls into the locker room.

The sound of raucous laughter from the Pep Squad girls echoes around them as it bounces off metal lockers and waterproof-painted walls – up ahead, El can see Ashley and a girl El thinks is named Lucia, thick as thieves as they gossip and giggle – and El lets the sounds of all wash over her as she glances at Jen. “Not as many people, but twice as loud,” she says in answer to Jen’s question.

A proud smile twists up Jen’s lips. “Hawkins Pride, baby!” she crows and it’s so adorable, El can’t
help but laugh, bubbly and effervescent.

“Hey, good job out there, Hopper!” another girl yells and El and Jen make their way to the lockers they stashed their things in.

El turns to the girl who called out to her, a senior girl who’s name El’s forgotten, and she smiles. “Thanks!”

“Remember to lock that stance a little better next time, though!” is the feedback she gets before the girl disappears to her own locker.

El’s brow furrows and it’s Jen who speaks next, a chortle escaping her. “Just ignore Wendy,” Jen says. “She’s, like, super critical.”

“No, she’s right,” El says, critiquing her own performance. She’d let herself get distracted by what was going on with Mike and it definitely affected how she was out there. “I could totally do better next time.”

“And you will,” Jennifer says as they stop in front of their lockers.

El spares a moment to give Jen a soft smile. “Thanks,” she says, grateful for the support. Regardless of anything else, El will always be grateful to have met Jen. Now, Stacey, on the other hand, is an entirely different story.

Jen returns the smile, shining brighter than the fluorescent lights above them. “Anytime!”

The first thing El does when she opens her locker is check her phone. Her dad’s picking her up and he’s supposed to let her know what his ETA is so she can see if she has time for a shower or not.

And, given the text message waiting for her – Be there in 15, sent a little more than 5 minutes ago – El knows she doesn’t have the time. “Ugh, guess I’m going to have to wait to shower until I get home,” she says. “Dad’s on his way.”

Jen scrunches up her nose. “Ew, I’m sorry.”

“Eh, it’s ok,” El says, trying to shrug it off. “Could be worse.”

“Yeah, but not much,” Jen says with eye-rolling obviousness, so stark and serious that it makes El laugh as she starts to change out of her uniform. There’s a heavy pause that lives in the space between the two girls before Jen breaks it, clearing her throat. “So, uh, several little birds have told me how one very cute superstar football player has been trying to catch your eye. Homecoming’s coming up in a few weeks. Play your cards right, you could be going on the arm of Zach Mercer.”

El knows the reaction Jen is hoping for and she’s afraid she’s about to disappoint her new friend. “God, please, anything but that.”

El strips off her uniform top and glances over at Jen. The other girl is part way through taking down her hair out of her complicated braided bun as she frowns over at El. “You would say no to Zach Mercer? But – I… you’re at least going to Homecoming, right?” Jen finally says after spluttering a bit, mouth slowly dropping open in shock.

There hasn’t been an announcement for Homecoming tickets yet – though El doesn’t doubt that Jen has the inside scoop on it – but El knows she very much wants to go. She love school dances, loves getting dressed up and dancing the night away. But there isn’t enough money on the face of the
planet to get her to go with Zach. “Well, yeah, obviously I want to go to Homecoming.”


“Just not with Zach,” El says with a shudder as, standing there in just her bra and underwear, reaches in to her locker for the day clothes she packed earlier that morning. She pauses, thinking about just who she’d like to go with, and a smile creeps its way onto her face.

It’s a smile that Jen notices and a low ‘ooooh’ creeps out from between her lips. “Looks like the new girl has a bit of a crush,” Jen says, smiling wickedly. “’Cmon, spill the beans. I’m dying to know what y’all up in New York find hot.”

For a moment, El pauses, considering. She takes in Jen’s eager face, eyes wide and trusting and, fuck it, it wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world to tell someone about this. At least, she’s have someone to gush over about her crush that is rapidly becoming so much more than a crush. “Well, there’s this guy who’s in half my classes,” El says, a smile curling up the corners of her lips as she thinks about Mike, thinks about the two of them at a dance, on a date, the two of them dressed up, smiling and happy…. “He’s smart and funny and, like, ridiculously cute. I’m thinking, once they announce Homecoming tickets are for sale, I’ll ask him if he wants to go.”

“Oh, taking the initiative,” Jen says, one eyebrow arching teasingly as she grins slyly at El. “A modern woman, very nice. So… who’s the lucky guy?”

A flutter builds in El’s heart and she finds herself short of breath. “Mike. Mike Wheeler.” His name leaves her mouth with an almost sizzling, dizzying rush, heart racing and breath catching in her throat. She pictures him watching her walk into Trig that morning, pictures the awe and attraction in his eyes, pictures the way his gaze drifted up and down her body as he stared at her while he sat there looking deliciously kissable in that red sweater. She thinks about his soft, goofy smiles and his witty, snarky quips and the sparkling intelligence in his eyes when they discuss anything in US History and, god, Mike Wheeler is practically perfect in every way. El’s already halfway in love with him and it hasn’t even been two weeks yet.

Only, it’s clear from Jen’s face that this is not a normal opinion as the other girl’s face falls, lips curling in the beginnings of a frown. “Really? Are you serious? Mike Wheeler? Like, president of A/V club, Mike Wheeler?”

It feels like someone just punched El in the stomach. This is not the reaction she was hoping for, like Jen’s surprised anyone could find Mike cute – honestly, there is something seriously messed up here.

Like, what in the fuck is wrong with people in this school? At the very least, El was hoping for supportive, not the horror that’s dawning on Jen’s face. It’s not like she needs it or anything - after all, she doesn’t need anyone’s permission or approval or anything for whatever happens between her and Mike - but it sure would be nice to feel like her preferences were respected. And, honestly, El expected better from Jen – not this judgmental snobbery, at least

She’s not sure exactly what name to put to the emotions that suddenly churn hot in her belly at the sour, disbelieving look on Jen’s face – anger, embarrassment, frustration, disappointment… probably all four and then some, if she’s honest – but she can feel the sneer that begins to creep up on her face, partially born from the whiplash from one side of the emotional spectrum to the other. “Hey, you asked.”

“But, El,” Jen says, nose wrinkling. “He’s a nerd.” It’s like the thought that El could like someone like Mike is the most foreign thing she’s ever encountered and it pisses El off like nothing else.
It’s hard to put on jeans when one’s angry, but El somehow manages, practically tearing them in her hurry to get them up her legs. “Yeah, well, so am I, Jen. And I like Mike, ok? And, if you don’t like it, you’re going to have to fucking deal.”

Hurt blossoms on Jen’s face and El immediately feels like an asshole. “God, sorry,” Jen murmurs, glancing away as she. “I was just… surprised, is all.”

“Yeah, well, don’t be,” El murmurs, still stinging with hurt – both on her behalf and on Mike’s. She reaches into her locker and grabs the t-shirt she packed. “I don’t get why you’re so surprised, anyway. He’s nice and smart and cute… any girl would be lucky to be with him.”

Still, Jen looks doubtful. “Well, I mean, if you like him, I guess, well… you like him.” She sighs as she wraps a towel around her, shoving the last of her clothes in her locker before she goes to take a shower. “Just… be careful, ok?”

El arches an eyebrow. “Why, has he done something horrible to another girl, or something?”

“Mike? Do something to another girl?” Jen repeats, spluttering a bit of a laugh. It’s almost cruel, how disbelieving that laugh sounds. “Please. I’d be surprised if he’s gotten anywhere past first base.” She pauses, sobering. “It’s just… girls like us don’t go out with guys like him. Being with someone like him, well… just be sure, ok? Some things, you can’t take back.” Jen gives El one last smile, hurt still lingering around the edges of her expression, before she walks away, heading off towards the showers with a small wave of her hand.

‘Some things you can’t take back’? El’s thoughts echo, the words spinning around inside her mind with almost dizzying confusion. ‘Girls like us don’t go out with guys like him’? Seriously, what the fuck? To hear Jen say it, it’s like El and Mike are practically two different species, completely incompatible in every way, when in reality, they’re just a boy and girl who (hopefully) find each other attractive.

El’s mood is sour once again, dragged down by the mild betrayal she feels – see what opening up to people gets you? you just get laughed at – and she finds herself shoving her things into her duffle bag harder than strictly necessary.

El all but stomps out to the front of the school to wait for Hop and, as she stands there, arms folded over her chest, the anger begins to fade.

But the hurt remains. From Dustin’s reaction on Monday morning to Jen’s just moments ago, it’s like the idea that someone like her would even so much as look twice at someone like Mike is a foreign, alien concept when, in fact, nothing has ever felt more natural in El’s entire life. It hurts that no one seems to believe her right off the bat, that she can’t seriously like Mike as more than a friend.

God, why is it so hard to believe? I don’t understand.

And she so doesn’t. In fact, she doesn’t want to. Call her a bit of an elitist snob, but these seemingly rigid social rules in this fucking high school are so fucking passé. It’s like something out of a 90s teen rom-com or something and El’s so fucking over it.

Her mood continues, hurt and still a little bit angry, as Hop rolls into the parking lot a few minutes later. Thankfully, her dad doesn’t say anything as they head home, obviously sensing that she isn’t in the mood to talk.

And, in fact, El’s still in a bit of a sulking funk all throughout Friday. It’s not helped by the furtive glances Mike shoots her way, like he’s not sure where her head’s at (and, honestly, she can’t blame
him because she’s not sure where her head’s at). He doesn’t seem quite as distant from her, but he obviously doesn’t know how to break through the dark cloud surrounding El, so he maintains a respectable distance.

On top of it all, El studiously avoids Jen all day, slinking off outside to eat lunch on her own, not talking to the girl during either French or PE. It’s stupid, but it hurts to look at Jen, to remember the conversation they had in the locker room after the pep rally.

Really, all it makes El feel like is she’s a) the world’s biggest baby that someone doesn’t agree with her that the boy she has a crush on is cute and worthy – god, she should have more courage of her own convictions. at least stop acting like someone kicked her puppy – and b) desperate to hit the reset button on this week.

By the time school lets out on Friday, El’s practically the first one off campus. She races to the police station to wait for her dad to finish work so she can go home and just leave this all behind for 48 hours.

And, thank god, it helps.

El spends Friday night and practically all Saturday alone and with her own thoughts. Hop gets called in for an emergency at work Saturday morning, so El’s only real contact with the outside world is the steady, but spread out series of texts from Will Friday night with updates as to where he is in the first Dresden Files novel, and the occasional text from Jennifer on Saturday.

One of those texts is practically a short novel of an apology – sorry about thursday… you’re free to like whoever you want… i was just surprised… i hope we’re still friends – and El’s heart promptly sinks into her stomach.

She doesn’t know what to say. She’s still at least a little peeved at Jen (she’s still a little peeved at everything, to be honest), but she knows she’s not blameless in any of this. Just because Jen did something shitty by looking down her nose at the fact that El likes Mike, doesn’t mean that El wasn’t equally shitty back by snapping at someone she thought was her friend.

El’s in the middle of doing her US History reading (a very exciting day she’s having, burying herself in homework while her dad’s at work) when she gets the apology text from Jen. She sits on the couch downstairs, surrounded by her school stuff, lower lip pulled between her teeth as she thinks about what to say.

i’m sorry, too, is what El texts back after a few minutes. shouldn’t have yelled at you. talk monday? after pep squad practice?

ok, sounds good! is the text that El gets back, complete with a cute, kissy face winking emoji. It makes El smile, almost despite herself. Maybe Jen didn’t act the best when El told her about her crush on Mike, but that doesn’t make Jen a horrible person.

In fact, Jennifer Hayes is, at the end of the day, a nice, sweet girl who didn’t deserve the flash of El’s temper. And, yeah, she might be a little closed minded when it comes to social status, but everyone has blindspots – including El.

The brief text message exchange lifts El’s spirits and the rest of her day, filled first with homework and then with a John Hughes movie binge (“Pretty in Pink” followed by “16 Candles”. She can’t help it – she’s in a Molly Ringwald kind of mood), goes by nice and relaxed. Not even Hop teasing her about how she’s being a lazy bum who’s been living on the couch all day puts a dent in her zen, happy spot and she goes to bed late that night all calm and almost floaty.
So when, maybe a half an hour before El falls asleep, Will texts her asking if he can come by the next day to borrow the second book in the Dresden Files series and El tells him, quote, *come by whenever*, she doesn’t even stop to wonder at the logistics.

After all, Will lives at least a 20 minute walk away and he doesn’t have a car.

*So who’s going to drive him?*

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“Hey, can we stop by El’s house on our way to the arcade? I’ll show you were to go.”

The words are spoken in lieu of a greeting as Will slides into the passenger seat of the Wheeler station wagon late Sunday morning.

The “good morning” that had been building on Mike’s tongue dies a sudden death at Will’s abrupt statement. His hands go limp where they’re clutching the steering wheel and the relaxed, mildly jubilant mood that had been his companion all weekend suddenly vanishes under the implications of Will’s request.

Because Mike isn’t about to tell Will no. Not when he could possibly get a glimpse of El on a sleepy Sunday morning.

He’s just not ready. He hasn’t had time to emotionally prepare to see her – he’d been waiting until later tonight to psych himself up for that. But the timetable has unexpectedly been moved up and now Mike’s suddenly very nervous.

Aww, man, it’d been such a normal weekend, too. After rushing to finish his homework and his chores Friday night and Saturday morning, he’d been able to spend *all day* Saturday completing the Destiny raid with the Party. Sure, it’d taken them a couple of tries and a few false starts, but once they figured out what they were doing, they completed the 6 hour raid and even had time to ooh and ahh over the exotics they’d won before crashing in their respective beds.

And, today, they’re taking the time to indulge in heading down to the retro arcade – because 8-bit is *in* these days – before gearing back up to go to school tomorrow.

Those plans did *not* include seeing the object of Mike’s affection, the girl who’s gotten him all turned upside down.

In that moment, Will looking at him expectantly, all Mike can think about is the last couple of days of the school week –

*seeing el in her pep squad uniform on thursday, flinching at the mention of ashley’s name when he forgot she was also on the squad. feeling the sting of el’s surprise when he mentioned cross country, watching her face fall as she realized her rudeness but unable to hide the hurt of her remark. it’d been awkward the rest of the day on thursday and mike knows it’s almost all his fault – because it always is.*

*friday, he thought, he could apologize for his attitude. but then she’d been in a weird mood, dark and sour and petulant, one mike is pretty sure wasn’t all because of him, and he didn’t know how to get to her, how to approach what was wrong, not knowing if she even would want him to ask. so he stayed quiet and just watched her, watched her like he has been with longing and tortured hope and*
hating himself a little all the while.)

– and he sighs, knowing that, once again, he gets the “privilege” of having absolutely no control over his heart’s decision-making power. “Um, hello to you, too,” Mike says, words as flat as the look he throws Will from the other side of the car. “And why are we going to El’s house? Does she know we’re coming over? And how do you even know where it is?”

The smile on Will’s face is manic and excited – needy is probably the best word, like he’s looking for his next hit, or something. “Because of this,” Will says as he holds out the book he borrowed from El. “Finished it yesterday morning and I need the next one, like, yesterday.” He gives Mike a shit-eating grin, eyebrow arching. “Texted her last night, so she knows we’re coming. She lives just up the road on our way into town – I know because I had dinner at her house on Wednesday, remember? Her dad invited me and my mom over?”

Mike tries not to scowl and mostly succeeds. “Oh, yeah, that’s right.” He sighs, running a hand through his hair, a helpless gesture. “Yeah, ok, sure. We can stop to get your book.”

“Oh, please, don’t try to hide how excited you are,” Will says. Out of the corner of his eye, Mike can see Will buckling his seatbelt and tries not to pay attention to the taunting energy coming from next to him as he throws the car in reverse and begins backing out of the Byers’ gravel driveway.

“Quit bugging me, Byers, or you’re walking today,” Mike says, grumbling.

“You talk a big game, Wheeler, but you wouldn’t dare.”

Mike backs into the road, wheel turned to point the nose of the car back towards down, and he throws Will a look as he shifts gears into Drive. He holds the stare, trying to impart the weight of just how fucking done he is, before he presses his foot down on the gas. “Just tell me where to turn, asshole.”

It’s a quick drive, maybe 5 minutes, and the only conversation is Will telling Mike where to turn – (Which turns out to be pretty fucking simple – back up the main road, left on Glen Drive, house at the very back end of the cul-de-sac and that’s it.)

– and Mike’s grateful because he needs the silence to fucking prepare himself. But when he pulls up into the driveway, he realizes that he’s not ready. Not at all.

Heart in his throat, Mike puts the car in park, but keeps the engine running. “Go on, I’ll wait here,” he says, the words coming out barely higher than a squeak.

“Uh, no,” Will says. “Man up and come inside, you loser. Don’t be the weirdo who waits in the fucking car.” He pauses, finger poised over the release for his seat belt. “Or are you chicken?”

The grin that spreads over Will’s face in the blink of an eye is infuriating and Mike actually finds himself full-on scowling this time. Shame boils up from deep within his stomach, heatedly mixing with the indignation that spreads through his veins, all no-he-fucking-didn’t, and Mike turns the engine off with a harsh flick of his wrist before he yanks up the parking brake. “I’m not chicken,” Mike bites out through gritted teeth, refusing to let himself think as he shoves open the driver’s side door, hands hastily unbuckling his seatbelt, and launches himself out of the car.

“Woah, slow down there, cowboy,” Will teases as he gets out of the car just after Mike. The two of them close their doors almost in stereo. “No need to hurry. She’s not going anywhere.”

Mike flashes Will the finger. “Lead the way, fuckface.”
“Ooh, someone’s getting testy. Better turn that frown upside down, Wheeler. Remember, you’re cuter when you smile,” Will says, snickering as he walks around the front of the car towards the stairs that lead up to the wrap-around porch and the front door. Mike trails behind, trying not to feel like a child goaded by some weird-ass reverse psychology trick, and fails miserably. Will practically fucking skips up the steps and Mike frowns – it’s absolutely not a pout – as he shoves his hands in his pockets, trying his best to both look relaxed and not slouch over in on himself.

_Get yourself together, Wheeler. Don’t want El to think you’re a total loser, now_, he thinks, trying to psych himself up into acting normal.

It doesn’t work. Mike can feel his shoulders slumping, spine folding, as he steps up behind Will.

The wood of the steps thuds solidly beneath his shoes and Mike takes a moment to inspect the front of the house as he trails behind Will.

_So, this is El’s house_, Mike thinks as he takes in the soft green paint and the white trim around the windows. There’s two Adirondack chairs with a low table between them on the porch off to Mike’s left and a heavy metal screen blocking the front door. The shades are all drawn and Mike can hear the murmur of music coming from inside.

Mike gulps, nerves cresting inside of him. _Oh god, someone’s definitely home._

Mike tries to calm down as he watches Will reach out and ring the doorbell, but it’s no use. His hands are clammy and trembling where he has them stuffed in his pockets and almost every instinct Mike has is screaming at him to turn around and hide in the car.

But before Mike can so much as prepare to run and hide, the front door opens and, on the other side of the screen door, legit the biggest man Mike’s ever seen stands there waiting for them. He’s half hidden by the screen, but Mike is still able to get a clear look at his face: bright blue eyes, face partially obscured by a goatee and what looks like day-old stubble. The expression on his face is politely neutral but with more than a hint of warning just under the surface.

This is the face of a man who can shift into Fuck Up Your Shit mode in the blink of an eye and not even break a sweat. And that’s not even accounting for the fact that Mike swears this man has to be twice his size and Mike’s never felt more like a skinny beanpole in his entire life.

This man is Hawkins’ new Chief of Police.

He’s also El’s dad.

_Holy fuck._

And then, it’s clear he recognizes Will because, in an instant, his face relaxes and a smile pulls up the corners of his mouth. “Will, hi. Didn’t know you were stopping by. El didn’t say anything,” he says, voice gruff.

Will holds up his hand in a wave. “Hi, Hopper. Just coming by for a sec to grab a book from El.”

Hopper (and, apparently he goes by his last name) pushes open the screen to greet them properly. “Oh, that’s probably why she didn’t say anything,” he says as he steps forward to hold the screen open with his shoulder. And then his gaze rises to look at Mike and Mike resists the urge to gulp in absolute terror. “And who’s your friend?”

“Oh, this is Mike, Mike Wheeler.” Out of the corner of his eye, Mike can see Will twist just enough to look back at him. “Say hi, Mike.”
Mike raises his hand and gives a weak wave. “Um, hi, sir. I’m just – I’m driving – I… sorry, hi.” Ok, if it wouldn’t be too much trouble, could the earth just open up and swallow him whole, like, right now?

“Don’t call me ‘sir’. Just ‘Hopper’ or ‘Hop’, please,” Hopper says, eyebrow quirking at Mike. “It’s nice to meet you, Mike. Little squirrelly though, aren’t you?”

Mike doesn’t – can’t – say anything, but Will lets out a laugh. “Yeah, he’s a little awkward,” Will says.

Hopper breathes out a quieter version of Will’s laugh and angles his body so he can gesture for Will and Mike to come in. “Well, El’s prancing around in the kitchen, singing along to some lovey-dovey music mix of hers.” It’s only then that Mike is able to pay attention to the music in the background – some sort of punk cover of a rockabilly song, a female voice he’s assuming is El’s overlaid on top of it.

He watches as Hopper pauses, a slow smile crossing his face before he holds a finger up to his lips in a shushing gesture. “C’mon, I’ll show you where she is,” Hopper says with what Mike can only describe as trolling levels of glee, like he’s barely holding back the urge to laugh.

Hopper lets Will and Mike into the house and Mike desperately tries to soak in every detail in the split second he gets to look around as Hopper leads them to the kitchen. There’s a living/family room combo off to his left, a staircase that leads upstairs straight ahead, and a dining room around the corner to the right from the front door. It’s homey and simple – the kind that would have his mother itching to “spruce up”, he just knows it – but Mike swears he can feel El’s presence surround him and it soothes him at the same time as making him itchy as hell, full of yearning and nerves and the strangest sense of euphoria.

This is El’s house, the girl he’s falling head-over-heels for. Holy shit, he’s in her house.

That thought colors just about everything and Mike feels like he’s floating as he follows behind Hopper and Will. The music gets louder as Hopper leads them to the kitchen through the central hallway and, just before they enter the kitchen, Hopper pauses to wordlessly remind them to be quiet. He then moves to lean against the entryway into the kitchen, shoulders shaking with silent laughter, and Will and Mike edge their way into the doorway, curious about what in the hell is so funny.

Mike’s heart is in his throat as he comes to stand behind Will, nervous and excited to see El, even though he’s so not mentally prepared for this whatsoever. And, when he does see her, for a long, almost endless moment, he can’t breathe.

At the edge of his peripheral vision, Mike can see Will trying to hold back laughter. And, sure, the sight in front of him is funny – more silly, than anything, if Mike’s being honest.

So, yes, it’s silly, but it’s also enchanting and beautiful and Mike’s heart does the most dizzying flip, stomach swooping in response, at the sight in front of him.

El’s in the middle of the medium-sized kitchen, dressed simply in a thin, gray tank top and the most adorable pj pants Mike’s ever seen, pale blue with cartoon panda bears on it. She’s cooking what seems to be a late breakfast – pancakes and bacon, from the smell of it, as she stands near the stove.

Well, standing isn’t quite right. More like dancing in place, hair swaying behind her as she dances and shimmies with highly over-dramatized motions. There’s a spatula in her hand that’s serving as her microphone as she sings along with the song, which Mike finally recognizes as “Build Me Up, Buttercup”.
El has no idea any of them are there – well, she maybe knows Hopper is somewhere, but El’s eyes are closed as she lives wholly in the moment, singing her heart out in the privacy of her own kitchen.

This is El in her natural environment, completely and totally herself, the version of her that is reserved for family only. There’s no one she needs to show off to, no one to show off to, and nothing to stop her from acting silly and adorable, totally free. She’s bright and vivacious and the most beautiful girl in the entire universe.

It’s intoxicating and Mike is completely and thoroughly enchanted.

And her singing voice is just… wow. Clear and smooth, it makes Mike’s heart race as shivers run down his spine. He doesn’t think he’s ever heard anything lovelier in his entire life and he just wants to hear her sing always.

Mike’s not sure how long they’ve stood there – probably only 20 seconds or so – when the song crescendos and begins to close out, the beat slowing and the instruments fading away until just the guitar and the piano are playing. El pours everything she has into the refrain of the chorus, eyes squeezed shut. “I need you, more than anything, darling,” she sings, and Mike finds himself wishing that she was singing to him. “You know that I have from the start. So build me up, buttercup, and don’t break my heart.” She holds the final note as the song comes to a roaring end.

And, in the pause between one song to the next, a bright ska song that Mike also recognizes, Hopper lets out a whoop and both he and Will start clapping. Mike, meanwhile, is too transfixed to do something even as simple as move his hands from where they’re hanging limply at his side.

No, Mike’s too busy staring at El, his ridiculous crush on her probably written all over his face, as El lets out a yelp of surprise. Clearly, she didn’t know anyone was watching as she spins around, eyes wide, and freezes when she doesn’t just see her dad, but Will and Mike also. A bright blush blossoms on her skin, creeping across her neck and face and, much to Mike’s surprise, she throws the spatula at Hopper, who laughs and ducks away from the projectile. “Ugh, Dad, you asshole!” El all but yells. “Why didn’t you tell me anyone was here?”

Hopper’s still laughing, but he does his best to respond. Mike, under the weight of El’s shocked embarrassment, is torn between wanting to slink away so she doesn’t get mad at him and glad to have just witnessed El’s impromptu concert because he knows he’s going to cherish the sight of what he just witnessed for the rest of his life. “I didn’t want to deprive our guests of your marvelous singing talent.”

El glares at her dad and raises a hand to give him the finger, which only makes Hopper laugh harder, but she otherwise says nothing, holding the pose for a long second for dramatic effect. It’s only when the intro of the current song finishes and the singer comes through on the speaker that El bursts into movement. “I want you to want me,” are the only words the singer manages to get out before El hurries to pause the song, flustered and embarrassed. “Oh, shit, sorry,” she says, voice shaky and Mike notices that her gaze flicks back and forth between him and her cellphone she’s juggling as she rushes to stop the music. “I apologize for the horrible taste in music my daughter has, by the way,” Hopper says, snickering a bit as he looks over at Mike and Will. “Clearly, she’s embarrassed about it, too. At least I raised her to have a proper amount of shame.”

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El rolls her eyes, a heavy groan leaving from her lips, as her arms flop dramatically at her sides. “I hate you. Why is my dad such a troll?” she asks, head tilted back like she’s beseeching the heavens, praying for an answer from some higher power.
“Hey, don’t forget you came from me, missy. You’re just as much of a troll as I am.”

El heaves one more sigh and looks pointedly at Mike and Will, like she’s trying to pretend that her dad doesn’t exist at all. Mike marvels at the casual bickering between father and daughter, knowing he could never get away with treating his parents like this, knowing he would never dare to. “So, Will, I take it you’re here for the next Dresden Files novel?” El asks, pointedly bright and chipper. It makes Mike almost want to laugh, it’s so cute.

Will does laugh. “Yep, pretty much.”

“It’s up in my room,” El says as she walks towards them, steps smooth and graceful as she glides across the kitchen, feet completely bare. “Keep me company while I go dig it out?” she asks, eyeing both Will and Mike.

“Yes, sure, of course!” Will says, answering for them both. But Mike manages a nod when El looks up at him, her gaze filled with a combination of hope and nervousness that makes his breath catch in his throat.

“Alright, follow me.” El glances at Hopper. “Make sure brunch doesn’t burn,” she tells her dad, eyebrow arched in warning.

“Yes, ma’am,” Hopper says with a jaunty, mocking salute. “Don’t go having any wild orgies up there while I’m not looking.”

“Ugh, please stop!” El calls over her shoulder as she walks away, leaving Mike and Will to trail behind her. “Don’t say stuff like that when my friends are around!”

Hopper laughs behind them and Mike would normally be overthinking the “orgies” remark while trying not to blush about it the entire time, but he’s too fixated on the word “friend” to think beyond that.

_Friends? She thinks they’re friends?_ Happiness bubbles up inside of Mike, bright and effervescent, and he wants to smile, wants to do a happy dance or something. Because El Hopper just casually admitted that she thinks of Mike as (at least) a friend and it’s more than he ever could have asked for.

El guides them upstairs and Mike has to work to keep his eyes on anything other than her backside. So he focuses intently on her hair, which spills down her back in luscious, honey chestnut waves, strands looking soft and enticing. He desperately wants to run his fingers through her hair, wants to know what those strands feel like against his bare skin, and the longing makes Mike want to sigh.

They get up to the second floor, carpet muffling their steps, and Will pauses in front of the open bathroom door. “Hey, uh, I’ll be right there, yeah?” He doesn’t wait for a response as he passes off the book he’s returning to El over to Mike and goes into the bathroom, door shutting behind him.

Mike looks over to see El blinking in stunned stillness at the door and it hits him, in this very moment, that this is the first time he’s ever been alone with El.

And, suddenly, his heart begins to race furiously in his chest.

“Well, then,” El says, biting back a laugh as she looks up at Mike. “Come on, then.” She turns and walks the short distance to her room, Mike trailing behind her like a lost, lovesick puppy.

Mike gulps as he steps over the threshold into El’s room. With the exception of his sisters, he’s never been in a girl’s bedroom before and his palms begin to sweat, the book he’s holding becoming slippery in his grip.
There’s a gravity to this moment that’s unearned, but Mike feels nevertheless. This is El’s bedroom, an inherently private place, an inner sanctum that Mike feels like he’s lucky to even get a glimpse of, even though he’s nervous as all hell.

And he’s not the only one who’s nervous, if the glance that El gives him over her shoulder is any indication. But there’s something else in her gaze besides nervousness, something else that Mike doesn’t want to look closely at for his own sanity, but something that sets his heart racing, blood pounding in his veins.

El smiles at him for a second before she pulls her lower lip between her teeth, biting the flesh lightly. The sight of it makes him want to groan out loud. “So, um, this is my room. I’m just gonna….” She points in the direction of the bookcase on one wall, one eyebrow arched just so.

“Oh, um, ok,” Mike says before he thrusts his hand out, the one holding the book Will’s returning. “Um, here.”

The grateful smile that El bestows upon him is sweet and thrilling and Mike decides he wants to live in this moment forever. “Thanks.”

El turns her back to him, then, and heads over to the bookcase, giving Mike free reign to look around. And look around he does.

His gaze first follows El to her bookcase, eyes scanning the titles he can see around the edges of her body. He’s pleasantly surprised at the number of sci-fi and fantasy titles he sees there, heart racing as he especially recognizes the Lord of the Ring trilogy, spines well worn like she’s read each book at least a few times.

Suddenly eager, Mike does a slow turn of the room, trying to take it all in. The walls are painted a light green, the furniture simple white to match. There’s a handful of posters and pictures on the wall – a collage made up of photos of sunsets, a corkboard with pictures of family and friends. There’s a couple of boxes still to be unpacked by her closet, which is shut.

Her bed, full sized and covered in a pale purple bedspread, is unmade (Mike gulps at the sight, trying desperately not to imagine what two teenagers can get up to in an empty bed – especially if one of them’s her – and fails miserably) and there’s a small pile of laundry on the end. A fierce blush leaps onto Mike’s face as he recognizes what is clearly one of El’s bras, pale blue and lacy, and, god, he needs to stop his imagination right now but he can’t.

He startles, whirling around the room to look at anything else to distract him from imagining El in nothing but her underwear, and his eyes land on her desk in the corner along the wall next to the door. There’s a TV on the adjacent dresser, turned on and illuminating the pause screen of “Zelda: Breath of the Wild”. Mike’s jaw drops and his gaze lands on the video game controller on the nearby desk, set down like she’d gotten interrupted suddenly, and a guffaw leaves him. “Holy shit, you play video games?”

He turns around just in time to see El turn as well, a look on her face that is both flat and incredulous. “Uh, yeah, doesn’t everyone?”

“Girls like you don’t.”

El’s eyebrow arches and Mike just knows she’s resisting crossing her arms over her chest. “Girls like me?” she echoes, tone as arched as her eyebrow.

Mike panics under the accusatory look and blurts out the first thing that comes to mind. “Yeah, pretty
ones.” Mike doesn’t register the words until he hears them come out of his mouth and he cringes, cheeks blazing with a fierce blush. Mike closes his eyes, afraid of El’s reaction.

Those last couple of days of the school week ended up being awkward for reasons Mike can’t even begin to understand and Mike’s not sure if El even wants to hear such platitudes from him. That’s besides the fact that guys probably tell her she’s pretty all the time – because she objectively is pretty, really just the most beautiful girl he’s ever seen – and Mike’s positive all those other guys were way smoother than him.

It’s a high-pitched giggle that has him opening his eyes and looking across the mere feet that separate him and El. She’s looking up at him, wide-eyed and beautiful, eyes shining with what Mike hopes is happiness. “You think I’m pretty?” is what El finally asks him, voice pitched with breathless hope.

Mike’s blown away by the raw emotion in her voice and he swears his brain short circuits. He’s no longer thinking, operating on auto-pilot, all doubt and logic swept away by the way El’s looking up at him. “Yeah, pretty. Really pretty,” he forces out, all but stumbling over the words.

The prettiest blush covers El’s cheeks and Mike yearns to trace the edges of her blush with his lips, up her jaw and along her cheekbone before sweeping back down to her lips. He’s never wanted to do anything more in his entire life. “Thank you,” she says a bit later, the words spoken through a gasp that has his stomach swooping.

There’s more Mike suddenly wants to say, emboldened by her reaction to him calling her pretty – how he thinks she’s more than just pretty, how he wants to make sure she’s ok after Thursday and Friday, how he wants to nibble around the edges of the question of whether she really would consider him someone she could date.

But Will bursts into the room, all chaotic and manic energy, and Mike feels the little bit of courage he’d managed to gather leave him in the blink of an eye. “So, you have that book for me?” Will asks, skipping over anything remotely related to polite.

El throws him a look and holds out a paperback novel Mike hadn’t even noticed she was holding until this moment. “Here you go, you junkie,”

The cheer Will gives as he reaches for the book is almost alarming in how needy it is. “Ooh, gimme!”

Mike lets out a weak laugh, wanting to be part of this conversation and feeling left out. “Wow, this book series must be something.”

El grins at him, both excited and reassuring and she twists, grabbing the book Will just returned, so she can hand it back over to Mike. “You wanna give the first one a try?” Her eyebrow arches, in challenge and in invitation and, suddenly, Mike’s not entirely sure they’re talking about a book anymore.

Mike holds El’s gaze for a long moment, gauging the sincerity of the offer. But, after a beat, Mike reaches out towards El. “Um, yeah, if you’re sure,” he says, fingers slowly clasping around the book.

“Mike,” El says, voice heavy with meaning. Her other hand, the one not still holding onto the book, comes up to briefly touch the bare skin of his wrist, right above where he’s holding the book (oh yeah, they definitely aren’t just talking about the book). “I’m sure,” she says, her touch sending a sharp thrill up his arm, the look in her eyes heavy in the best possible way.

There’s so much Mike wants in this moment. He wants to grab the hand that just touched him and
pull her close. He wants to lean over and kiss her, wants to explore the meaning of the look in her eyes. He wants to run his fingers through her hair and wrap his arms around her. He wants to feel her snuggle close to him while he reads the book she’s letting him borrow, wants to peer up over the top of the pages every once in a while to see how she’s progressing in the video game she’s playing.

Mike just wants and the force of it threatens to pull him under and drown him in pure emotion.

He gulps against the sensation, heart beating rapidly in his chest, and Mike can feel the wild flutter of his pulse just beneath the skin along his neck. It occurs to him that El still hasn’t pulled away, like she’s frozen under the same spell that has him ensnared, and he hopes she doesn’t want to pull away as badly as he doesn’t.

“Great!” Will announces, startling both Mike and El. Their hands drop away, Mike left holding the book, and he keenly misses the feel of her close to him. “Now we can all talk about the book. Mike, you’re going to love it. It’s so good.”

Mike looks over at Will, a weak smile on his face. He’d completely forgotten Will was in the room, he’d been so swept up in El. “Can’t wait,” Mike says and his gaze drifts back over to El. She’s looking up at him, amused and annoyed, eyes sparkling above a barely contained smile, like she’s trying to hold back laughter. God, she’s so pretty….

“Great!” Will announces, startling both Mike and El. Their hands drop away, Mike left holding the book, and he keenly misses the feel of her close to him. “Now we can all talk about the book. Mike, you’re going to love it. It’s so good.”

Mike looks over at Will, a weak smile on his face. He’d completely forgotten Will was in the room, he’d been so swept up in El. “Can’t wait,” Mike says and his gaze drifts back over to El. She’s looking up at him, amused and annoyed, eyes sparkling above a barely contained smile, like she’s trying to hold back laughter. God, she’s so pretty….

“We should get going, though,” Will says, once again yanking Mike back into the present. “We’re gonna be late as it is.”

Curiosity sparks on El’s face. “Ooh, where are you guys going?”

“There’s this cool retro arcade on the other side of downtown,” Will says. “It’s awesome. They have, like, all these great arcade cabinets and if you order a three large pizzas, your whole group gets to play unlimited on all the machines. We go, like, once a month so we can all save up enough money to go.”

“Aww, that sounds like fun!” El says and, holy shit, she means it.

“You wanna join?” Mike blurts out, almost shocked at the words that escape him. Did he just invite her out?

From the look on her face, eyes going wide with shock as she blinks rapidly a couple of times, he did. But, when she smiles a moment later, bittersweet, Mike knows she’s going to decline. “Oh, I would, but I have laundry to do and, well, Sundays are kind of my day for me and my dad.” She cringes, like the words were painful to say. “Sorry. Rain check, though?”

An awkward flutter ripples through Mike, hints of doubt sown in the back of his head – does she mean it or is it just lip service? – and he tries his best to smile. “Oh, yeah, sure, absolutely. Next time, yeah?”

“Next time,” El echoes.

“Ok, now that that’s sorted, we need to get going, Mike,” Will says.

A flash of irritation sparks in Mike’s chest – fucking seriously, why does Will keep interrupting? – but he suppresses it and smiles over at Will. “Yeah, ok, we should go.”

“Thanks for the next book, El,” Will says as, by some unspoken agreement, the three of them begin walking out of El’s room and back downstairs.
“No problem! Remember, you gotta let me know what you think, ok?” El says as they make their way down the stairs. Her elbow brushes against Mike’s arm as they walk almost side by side and Mike almost rolls his eyes at the way that a shiver runs through him at the simple, unintentional touch.

“Oh, of course,” Will says. “You know I won’t hesitate to live-text my reactions.”

El giggles and her eyes slide over to Mike. “You, too, yeah? It’s one of my favorite book series, so I want to know what everyone thinks of it.”

Mike’s heart skips a beat in his chest – holy shit, there’s a legitimate, non-school related reason to talk to El and he loves it – and he manages to give her a smile. “Yeah, sure, of course,” he blurts out.

“Good,” El says and she squeezes past Mike and Will to open the front door to show them out. “So, uh, I’ll see you guys tomorrow?”

“Yep, sounds good!” Will says. “Have fun with your laundry.” There’s a teasing grin on Will’s face and Mike elbows Will in the side.

“God, stop being an ass,” Mike says, rolling his eyes.

“Stop being a killjoy, Michael,” Will fires back with, laughing all the while, before he waves at El. “Bye, El.”

“Yeah, see you tomorrow,” Mike says.

El smiles, brighter than the sun shining outside, and waves at the two of them as they walk out onto the porch. “Bye, guys!”

Mike and Will wave once more before they turn and head down the porch stairs. Mike hears the sound of El closing the door behind them a moment later and a wistful sigh escapes him, cut off from her once more.

“So, what was that all about?”

The question comes at Mike with no context and he glances over at Will as they make their way over to his car. “What was what?”

Will gives Mike a look. “You and El, you idiot. I honestly thought you two were going to start making out right in front of me, or something.”

A fierce blush explodes on Mike’s face – god, part of him so wishes that would have happened – and he tries to counteract it by glaring over at Will. “Shut up, that’s not what was going on.”

A knowing look crosses over Will’s face as he reaches the passenger-side door. “Uh-huh, suuuure. I know what I saw, Wheeler.”

“I also know you can walk to the arcade,” Mike mutters as he climbs in behind the wheel. Will just laughs at him and, thankfully, drops the topic for the rest of the day.

But, as Mike drives both him and Will to the arcade, he can’t help but think that there’s a point buried somewhere deep in Will’s accusation.

Whenever he’s around El, it’s like the rest of the world doesn’t even matter to Mike. Which is so, so dangerous, just overwhelming in the best, most worrying way possible. He kept forgetting that Will
was in the room, that anyone else other than him or El even existed. God, he’s so head over heels for her already that he’s already at the tunnel vision stage and he just knows this is going to continue to get worse.

And, yeah, he really, really wants to make out with El.

He just isn’t sure she feels the same way.

The rest of the day goes swimmingly. The Party hangs out at the arcade, eating pizza and giving each other shit and playing retro video games all day. It’s a great day, one Mike’s thankful that he has friends who want to experience it with him.

But, the entire time, thoughts of El run through the back of his head and he can’t stop thinking about the book in the backseat of his car, the one that she lent him, the one that’s waiting for him to read once he gets home.

He also can’t stop thinking about everything else that happened in her room – calling her pretty, the way she blushed in response, her hand on his wrist, the heady look of promise in her gaze…. Yeah, Mike’s a total goner and almost doesn’t care that he doesn’t care anymore.

Mike starts reading the book she lent him later that night, once he’s in bed. His fingers tremble at first, struck by the fact that this is one of her favorite books, and he feels close to her in a way he never thought possible. But then he begins to lose himself in the story and the tremulous feeling fades.

Mike gets about a third of the way through the book before he has to put it down and go to bed. There’s a smile on his face because he can’t wait to talk to El about what he’s read so far and he’s looking forward to her pleased excitement that he’s reading a book she likes.

And El doesn’t disappoint. One of the first questions she has for him when she walks into Trig on Monday morning (besides “How was the arcade?”) is “Have you started reading ‘Storm Front’ yet?” There’s a smile on her face, bright and excited and it’s everything Mike is hoping for as he nods and begins to tell her how far he’s gotten, what he likes about it so far, and so on.

El dives right into the conversation, the two of them going back and forth until the bell rings and class begins. And the entire time, Mike can’t help the way happiness explodes inside of him. He can feel it, they’re becoming friends, and he’s never been more excited about anything in his entire life.

Yes, El Hopper has the ability to shatter his heart in a million pieces. But as she sits next to him, gushing about a fantasy novel of all things, Mike can’t help but be thrilled at the opportunity to get to know this amazing, beautiful girl, to get to be friends with her, even if nothing else ever happens.

Mike’s on Cloud 9 all throughout the rest of the morning, all smiles and buoyant happiness, like nothing can get him down. It’s dangerous, him feeling this way, because Mike’s so very aware that everything is one step away from getting yanked out of his grasp at any moment. He knows he should be cautious, but he can’t bring himself to be.

This is especially true as Mike starts trying to think of ways to get to spend time with El, wondering if she’d even want to – that moment in her room has given him hope beyond his wildest expectations and he’s already plotting and planning, trying to work up the courage to ask her any of it.
But, like the universe is finally looking out for him, Mike gets his chance.

The bell rings signaling the start of their US History class and Mike and El are forced to stop their conversation – more gushing about the Dresden Files, El telling Mike about the author’s other books that she recommends – as Ms. Palecki comes around from behind her desk, a stack of handouts in her hand. “Alright, class, happy Monday,” she says as she prepares to pass out the papers one row at a time. “Today is the day I know you’ve all been waiting for: your pair assignments.”

The whole class groans and Mike slumps a little in his seat. God, he’d forgotten about those, almost completely forgot about the fact that he’s going to be assigned to work with someone for the rest of the year on a project worth half his grade.

“How, don’t worry,” Ms. Palecki says as she works her way down row by row, handing out a sheaf of papers each time. “I’ve been watching you for the past couple of weeks and I tried my best to match you all up based on you strengths, weaknesses, and personalities. I have a pretty good track record of this over the years, so it won’t be as bad as you think.” She gets to the row El’s sitting in and hands each Mike and El half of what’s left in her hands. “But these pairs are non-negotiable. There will be no switching. I’ll give you a few minutes to introduce yourself to your partner and then we’ll pick up where we left off on Friday.”

Mike grabs a paper, passes the stack off to the person behind him, and nearly falls out of his chair when he finds his name on the paper… and sees who’s name is next to his.

Beside him, El gasps and he knows she’s seen it too.

A whole combination of emotions explodes in his veins – terror, excitement, disbelief – and Mike looks over at El, eyes wide and mouth agape. She’s looking at him right back, but there’s a brightness in her gaze that sets him ablaze and Mike’s heart tumbles over in his chest.

El smiles at him, blindingly so, and lets out the most beautiful, relieved giggle he’s ever heard.

“Well, hello there, partner.”

Chapter End Notes

My oh my, is that a cliffhanger I’ve left you on? Or am I just being a tease?

Or is it both?

Yes, Mike and El are officially partners. Guess that means they’re going to have to spend all this time together. Alone. I’m sure you guys are just so disappointed about this. Really, this is just the worst, am I right?

Ok, ok, I’ll be serious. This is it, y’all - things are getting real from here on out. It’s full speed ahead and I’m SO EXCITED.

So buckle up, folks. It’s going to be a wild ride.

(and if any of y’all wanna come yell at me about this fic, or Mileven in general, or just Stranger things, come hit me up on tumblr. I go by @fatechica there, too, so please come talk to me!)
Um, yeah, ok. So......I know it's been LITERALLY A MONTH since I posted the previous chapter, but I'm still here!

Life got INSANELY BUSY for a variety of reasons all at the same time and I just didn’t have time to think much less write fic for a bit there. Like, I was lucky if I was able to write a few sentences some days, it was that bad. 

But, I persevered and I'm back, baybee! This isn't as long as some of my previous chapters, but it's all Mike and El being all twitterpated with each other (and then some, haha), so I hope the sheer amount of fluff makes up for it! Enjoy!

It almost feels like a dream come true.

In fact, El’s pretty sure she actually dreamed this and she has to resist the urge to pinch herself just in case.

God, she can’t believe it. It’s right there on the piece of paper in her hands and she still isn’t sure what she’s seeing is real.

Because her and Mike have just been paired up to work together for the rest of the school year and it feels fantastic.

El had hoped it would end up like this – oh, how she hoped. The second she heard from Ms. Palecki that they would be working on their big year-long project in assigned pairs, El knew the only person she wanted to work with was Mike. The odds had been against her, to be sure – there were 20 other students in the class and it was equally likely she could have been paired up with any of them.

Still, it never stopped her from laying in bed as she tried to fall asleep over multiple nights over the last couple of weeks. A giddy smile would stretch up her lips as she imagined having a reason to spend hours and hours alone with the most beautiful boy she’s ever met.

And now she has one.

A gasp escapes her, then, as El looks down at the handout with her name next to Mike’s and the full implications of it well and truly begin to hit her.

Here’s her chance, the one she’s been waiting for, the one she didn’t even know she was really waiting for until she was able to hold it in two hands. It’s her chance to really become friends with Mike Wheeler… and hopefully more, if she plays her cards right.

El’s aware she’s smiling like an idiot, but she doesn’t care. She’s just so happy right now.

She looks over at Mike and sees him turning to look back at her. He’s adorably gobsmacked, like it never even occurred to him that them getting assigned to work together was possible, much less probable. The confusion on Mike’s face is so soft and cute that El can’t help but giggle, overjoyed
beyond belief. “Well, hello there, partner,” she says, bright and teasing.

Mike’s mouth snaps closed from its gaping position before he proceeds to open and close it a few times as he searches for something to say, as the shock seems to slowly work its way through his brain. “Wow, ok then,” he says after a moment. His brow rises – a quick arching of his eyebrows as surprise ripples across his face – and Mike breathes out a quiet laugh, the sound escaping him in a huffed breath as his shoulders rise and fall with incredulous humor.

Mike refocuses on her and El is fascinated by the interplay of emotion on his face – incredulous and wary, but, beneath it all, pleased. He gives her a soft smile that hits her straight in heart with the way the corners of his lips turn up just so. “So, partners. For the whole year.”

“So it seems,” El says, her own smile turning into a wry grin. Amusement bubbles up inside of her and she arches an eyebrow teasingly. “Disappointed?”

Oh, she knows Mike’s not disappointed, not in the slightest. No, El can see the happiness and excitement bubbling just under the surface – she know Mike well enough for that – but it’s just too much fun teasing him.

Especially as panic rises up on his face, skin going almost white as the blood drains from it. “Oh, no, I’m – I could never – I just-”

A giggle, sudden and crisp, bursts from El’s lips and she can’t even bring herself to be sorry. “Oh my god, I’m just teasing, I swear. Please, don’t think I actually think that.”

Mike blushes and it’s almost hypnotizing, watching his skin go from bone white to deep red in the space of a couple of heartbeats. “Oh, well… good, I guess.”

El takes pity on him – he really doesn’t deserve her whimsical flirting when he seems to be so topsy-turvy. “Sorry,” she says, the word spoken through a wistful sigh. “I’m just excited to be working with you and I get punchy when I’m excited. I need to remember that not everyone’s on the same page with that kind of energy.”

Mike gives her a soft smile, all warm forgiveness. “Hey, it’s ok. Don’t worry about it.” He bites his lip and glances down at his desktop, radiating nervousness that somehow manages to look absolutely adorable on him. “So, um, we should probably figure out a time to start working on our project. Or, at least figure out what we want to do, yeah?”

El glances around the classroom, just enough to see that Ms. Palecki isn’t looking in her direction, and leans over to reach into the front pocket of her backpack for her phone. She straightens, only mostly able to bite back the smile that pulls at her lips. “What’s your number?” she asks as she quickly unlocks her phone and navigates her way to her contacts. She tries to ignore the pitter-patter of her heart, the way her fingers tremble where she’s gripping her phone, but it’s hard. There’s just so much weight to asking someone for their number, so much meaning.

And El’s never meant anything more in her life.

Mike’s brow furrows, confusion laid over the top of his nervousness. “Why?”

The confusion, blunt as it is, cuts through some of El’s own nerves and she rolls her eyes even as a giggle bubbles out of her. “So we can coordinate and keep each other in the loop,” she says before she arches an eyebrow, teasing and coy. “Plus, this way I can bug you about The Dresden Files whenever I want.”

“God, you would, wouldn’t you?” Mike all but mutters, but there’s a small grin on his face despite it.
“Alright, you ready?”

El’s fingers are poised over her screen and she nods at Mike, a frisson of excitement trickling down her spine. “Ready.” Mike gives her his number, dictating it to her a few digits at a time, and once his number is in her phone, El sends him a short text message – *hi, this is el* – before she puts her phone away with a triumphant grin. “Great! Sent you a text, so now you have my number, too. But you were saying earlier? About getting together to work on the project?”

Mike blinks for a long second, temporarily distracted by the buzzing of his phone inside his pocket from El’s incoming text message. “Oh, uh, yeah, that’s right,” he says, a faint blush spreading across his cheeks. “Was thinking maybe sometime after school this week. Does that work for you?”

El takes a moment to think about what she knows about her after school plans for the upcoming week. “Um, tomorrow or Thursday would work best, I think,” she says slowly as she considers. “I’m pretty sure my dad signed us up to have dinner again at Will’s house on Wednesday.”

“Again? Isn’t that, like, the third time in two weeks?” Mike asks forehead furrowing as his brows arch.

El wants to giggle from sheer happiness – god, Mike’s been paying enough attention to know how often her and Will’s families have had dinner? - but she holds it back. “I think my dad has a thing for Will’s mom. Really, it’s only a matter of time before they stop using me and Will as crutches and actually *go out* on a date of their own by themselves.”

Mike’s nose scrunches up. “Isn’t that… weird?”

El shrugs. “Considering how there hasn’t been anyone my dad’s been interested in since my mom left *and* there’s a history between my dad and Will’s mom… no, not so weird.”

Mike gives her another long look before he shrugs, one shoulder lazily rising and falling, and moves back to the matter at hand. “So, tomorrow or Thursday for you, then?” He pauses, looking up briefly as he thinks. “How about tomorrow? We can head over to my house after I get out of Cross Country, if that’s ok, and I’ll drop you off at home after.”

“Ooh, that sounds good to me,” El says, internally doing a happy dance at the knowledge that she’s going to get to spend at least a few hours alone with Mike, even if it is under the pretext of doing school work. “Also, we can still meet up after school on Thursday if we decide we need it.”

A small spreads over Mike’s face, tinged with nervousness. “Ok, tomorrow it is. Um, I usually get out of practice around 4:15 or so, so you’d have to wait around somewhere. Is that ok?”

El brushes away Mike’s concern with a breezy wave of her hand. “Totally fine – I can do my other homework or read or something. So, whaddya say, meet out in the parking lot at 4:15?” She’s smiling, too excited to contain, and El doesn’t even care that she’s wearing her heart on her sleeve.

The smile on Mike’s face widens and there’s a sweet shyness to the expression that makes El’s heart flutter almost dangerously in her chest. “Sounds good to me.” His words are quiet, almost lost in the din of the other students talking. But El can still hear the eagerness in his voice and she feeds off it, emboldened.

“This is going to be really good, I can feel it,” El says as, out of the corner of her eye, she sees Ms. Palecki stand up to start the actual lecture. “You and me are going to make a really good pair.” There’s no time for Mike to respond as Ms. Palecki shouts out to bring the class back to order. But El does manage to wink over at him, biting back the giggle that threatens to burst out from behind her
smiling lips at the wide-eyed flush that takes over Mike’s face.

*God, could he be any cuter?* El thinks as she makes herself focus on the lecture. It’s hard, though, because the hour seems to float by, like she’s on a cloud of pure happiness. She finds she can barely pay attention to the early formation of the American Colonies – which, she needs to because this is very probably going to be part of her project. But Mike’s just so cute and she’s so excited that she gets to work with him for the entire year.

The bell signaling the end of 5th period catches El off guard, startling her in her seat. She’d been caught up in daydreaming, imagining her and Mike spending hours together… and what they could get up to during that time –

*the two of them, alone, sitting on the couch, the floor, her bed, there are papers all around them – they are working, after all. it’s mostly silent, talking really only to ask the other person to pass something over or point out something they’ve found in the vast sea of papers that surrounds them. but the air between them is filled with sweet tension – shy glances, the heart-pounding brush of their fingertips when they pass anything to one another. over time, they’ve slowly moved closer to each other, one inch at a time, until they’re sitting right next to each other, shoulders touching, outer length of their thighs pressed against each other, the heat of him bleeding into her skin through her clothes.

*her heart races when she notices how close he is and she turns to look at him just as he’s doing to the same to her. a gasp sticks in her throat when she sees him looking down at her, the look in his eyes dark and bright all at the same time, sending shivers down her spine with the depths she sees in his gaze. the world around her freezes, time ceasing to matter entirely, and maybe she leans in, or he does, or they both do, soft and slow, breath caught in her throat as if exhaling will break the spell that’s wrapped around them with seductive fingers.

her eyes flutter shut, eyelashes beating like hummingbird wings, mere seconds before his lips touch hers, and el has to resist the urge to whimper at the feel of mike’s mouth on hers, gentle and a little shy, his lips soft and warm, tugging on hers just so.

*the kiss draws to a slow end, mouths parting just long enough for her to suck in a desperate gulp of air before his mouth meets hers once more. but this time, there’s the unmistakable edge of heat and need in the way mike’s mouth slants against hers, in the angle of their kiss. el feels herself falling, falling into the kiss, into him, and she never, ever wants to get back up and–*

El yelps a little as the bell rings, almost lifting entirely off of her seat as she startles. A fierce blush creeps up her cheeks, rudely yanked as she was out of her daydream, a combination of embarrassment over losing herself in a daydream in the middle of class and frustration over the daydream getting cut short.

*Dammit, it’d just been getting to the good part,* El thinks with a mental pout as one hand almost petulantly closes her notebook (not that she’d taken many notes, but still…).

“You spaced out over there? Don’t make me regret being partners with you so soon. It hasn’t even been an hour yet.” The voice is Mike’s, light and teasing, and it startles El almost as much as the bell did.

El’s breath catches in her throat as she hurries to look at him, feeling her hair swishing around her neck, eyes wide and breath hitched. He’s looking at her with a cheeky grin that’s also a little timid at the same time, like he thinks he’s taking a risk by being teasing with her, but is going for it anyway.
El notices this – it’s just too endearing for her not to – but almost immediately after she looks at him, her gaze drops down to his lips, the very same lips she was just daydreaming about kissing mere moments ago. Her cheeks flush even hotter and El swears she’s never anything more in her entire life than the way she wants to kiss him right now.

El barely manages to bite back a groan, but only manages by biting her lower lip instead. She sucks in a hard breath through her nose as she takes in the curve of Mike’s grin, the fullness of his lips, how warm and soft they look despite being a little chapped. God, she wants to kiss him so bad, she can barely contain herself, every inch of her itching to follow through on the craving.

But, then, her gaze flicks up to the rest of Mike’s face to see him now looking at her, his eyes filled with a bewitching combination of amusement, confusion, and bashfulness. Honestly, she’s never going to get over just how cute he is….

“You don’t even know what I was thinking about,” El says with a grin of her own, quirking an eyebrow at him as she packs up her things so they can head over to Honors Chem together. It’s become something of a routine for the two of them over the past couple of weeks, to walk together from US History to Chemistry, and El savors every second for those few minutes.

“Well… what were you thinking about?” Mike asks, his voice accompanied by the sound of him zipping up his backpack.

El looks back over, poised to slide out of her desk and stand up, and she pauses in place as her eyes meet his once more, gaze laden with all the things she was just daydreaming about. “Oh, I’m sure you can maybe figure that out, yeah?”

“Oh,” Mike all but chokes out after a moment, face heating up adorably.

El giggles as they both stand up and begin making their way to Chem, the two of them falling in step by each other’s side with an ease that is nothing short of marvelous, if El thinks about it long enough.

Neither of them say anything until they’re both out in the hallway and El can barely hear the sound of Mike clearing his throat over the near cacophony of other students in the hallway before he speaks. “Hey, um, El?”

El glances over, smiling up at him as they weave through the other students around them. “Yeah, Mike?”

Mike bites his lip, eyes cast down for a brief moment, before he speaks. “You’re honestly looking forward to working together, yeah? Like, you’re not actually, like, really disappointed to be my partner for US History and just lying to me, right? I mean, I’d understand if you were, I just-”

“Mike,” El says forcefully, cutting him off before his rambling can gather full steam. “Honestly, I’m excited to be your partner.” She shrugs a little, letting out a tittering giggle. “I like you – you’re smart and funny and nice – and I’m looking forward to working with you because it’d be nice to get to know you better.” She arches an eyebrow at him. “You believe me, don’t you?”

Mike shrugs, almost resigned, but he still offers her a smile, however small. “Yeah, I guess.” He gulps in a deep breath. “I’m looking forward to this, too. If I had to be paired up with anyone in that class, I’m happy it’s you.”

El almost fucking melts at the sweet sincerity in Mike’s voice. She knows she’s smiling like a lovesick fool right now, but she doesn’t care. “I’m happy, too,” she says as they approach the door to their Chem class.
And, before they go their separate ways like they always do, so Mike can sit with Lucas and she can sit with Carrie, El gives Mike one last bright smile. Usually, he gives her just a small wave, maybe a quirk of his lips that is almost a grin, but nothing more and El doesn’t know why.

But this time, finally, he smiles back, full lips stretching as his mouth curves up, showing just the briefest flash of his teeth before he turns away.

And, in this moment, El feels nothing but victorious.

Well, now we’re starting to get somewhere….

It’s all Mike can think about and it’s sent his thoughts into a tailspin – being paired up with El for their US History project; the insinuation, if he was reading the look in her eyes right, that El had spaced out in class because she was thinking about him in decidedly more-than-friendly ways; how she honestly and genuinely sounded happy to be working with him. He goes through the afternoon feeling like he’s in a fog, a happy fog, and part of him doesn’t even care.

It is a little annoying, though, when it bleeds into A/V Club and he still can’t stop thinking about El long enough to effectively lead the meeting. Instead, Dustin runs roughshod over the majority of the hour, talking about how he knows a, quote, “sweet hookup” to get their hands on some commercial-grade telecom equipment. Will’s excited, Lucas is skeptical, but interested and Mike? Well, Mike’s daydreaming about El. In the one room he promised himself was going to be an El-Hopper-free zone.

He thinks about the way her hair cascaded down her back during class, all silky and smooth. He thinks about how she smiled at him when they made arrangements to work at his house tomorrow night. He thinks about the faint hint of the scent of her shampoo and perfume as they walked the short distance from History to Chem, about how he wishes the distance were longer so he could spend more time by her side.

And Mike especially thinks about how, tomorrow, he’s going to spend hours with El. At his house. Alone.

Oh, sure, his mom and Holly will probably be home, but Mike and El will either be working up in his room or down in the basement, just the two of them, a door between them and the rest of the world. Where they could get up to, well… anything if they really wanted to.

Not that anything’s going to happen, but just the thought that something could gives him heart palpitations. He’s starting to come around to the idea, as crazy as it is, that for some odd-ass reason, El seems to actually like him. True, Mike still doesn’t entirely believe yet, but all the evidence seems to point that El is attracted to him for reasons he can’t even fathom, but that he’s also not dense enough to ignore.

And, though he still doesn’t know how much he can trust it, Mike has pretty much decided that if he’s not going to jump with both feet, he’s at least willing to dip his toes in, so to speak, to put himself out there just enough to see if El’s being more than sincere in her flirtations. But, as Mike well knows, there’s a huge difference between being willing and being able.

So, suffice it to say, he’s nervous about spending long stretches of time alone with El. Because he’s
him and she’s her and he knows he’s going to spend way too much time staring at her like a goober, like a lovesick idiot salivating over a pretty girl.

Not just pretty – beautiful, his brain takes care to remind him. The most beautiful girl he’s ever seen. And he gets to spend hours alone with her tomorrow.

(hours alone, just the two of them, sitting across from each other on the couch in the basement, papers between them. he stares at her across the short distance that separates them, marveling at her beauty, in awe of her presence.

it doesn’t matter what el is wearing because she’s always beautiful, no matter what, but in this daydream, she’s wearing the same clothes she was wearing when he went with will to her house – cute pj pants and a tank top. she’s adorable and beautiful and it makes mike’s heart ache something fierce in the best way possible.

naturally, it doesn’t take long for el to notice that mike’s staring at her and he wants to look away, but he’s braver in this daydream than he is in real life, so he doesn’t, instead keeping his eyes trained on her – on the sweep of her cheekbones; the soft, pink flush of her skin; the rich, fullness of her lips, quirking up into his favorite of her smiles, the one that is knowingly teasing (god, just the sight of it does the most delicious things to his stomach and heart rate, all heart pounding and stomach swooping).

“you’re staring at me,” she says, coy and sweet.

“i am. does it bother you?” he asks, sounding more confident than he really is.

her eyebrow quirks; mike’s enchanted. “only if i get something in return.”

oh, how they’re playing with fire right now and mike wants to let himself be consumed by the flames. “well... what do you want?”

el doesn’t say thing as her lips curl up even more, grinning to the point that the dimples of her cheeks make an appearance. instead, she leans forward, faster than mike can reasonably process with how she makes him feel. she pauses, inches away, papers crinkling beneath her knees as she edges closer and balances herself with her hands on his shoulders. mike shivers at her touch. “is this ok?” she asks and mike swears he almost swoons at the feel of her breath against his mouth, her eyes so close he can’t focus properly on her face.

“is what ok?” he asks, dumbfounded (because he knows he would be – she overwhelms him in the best way possible and, god, he doesn’t care).

“i’m going to kiss you now,” she says and, before mike can fully register what’s going on, el does just that. her mouth is soft and sweet against his, lips warm and full. he’s only ever kissed one girl before in his entire life, but it was nothing like this. it didn’t make him feel like he does now, like he could just float away, how every nerve in his body has migrated to his lips and where her hands are gripping his shoulders. he barely has the presence of mind to kiss her back, slow and clumsily, nothing like a girl like her deserves to be kissed. but because it’s a daydream, el doesn’t mind.

instead, her mouth slants harder against his, his lower lip slipping between hers as her tongue darts out to glide along the seam of his mouth, and mike forgets his name entirely.

they trade kisses like this for mike doesn’t know how long, his own hands having come up to hold her close – one on her waist, the other cupping her cheek, fingers dipping just into her hair so his fingertips are surrounded by the soft, silky strands. but the mood shifts eventually – kisses growing
deeper and hotter, lips parting and meeting impatient and insistent, like they can’t get enough, like they never want to get enough – and el surges forward, knees going to either side of his hips as she straddles his lap, the press of her weight against the tops of his thighs more than thrilling as his hand slides fully into the silken waterfall of her hair, and –

“Hey, Space Cadet!”

The words are accompanied by a swift kick to Mike’s shin that rudely yanks Mike back to earth, pain shooting up his leg. Mike can feel his face heating up as he whirls to face Dustin, the source of both the moniker and the kick to the shin. “Dustin, what the hell?”

“What do you mean ‘what the hell’? Where the fuck did you go?” Dustin asks, face pinched with an angry pout. But then, it’s like Dustin takes another look at Mike and Mike knows the blush on his face betrays everything as Dustin’s expression morphs from annoyed to amused. “Oh, ho, ho, looks like someone is thinking about a certain brunette we all know. A certain new girl who just happens to also be on the Pep Squad and in half of your classes.”

“Dude, fuck off,” is the only rejoinder Mike can come back with as the flush on his face just roars with heat and Mike can feel himself blushing to the roots of his hair. Because he can’t deny Dustin’s words at all.

“Y’know, I’m starting to think this is more than a crush,” Lucas says with a snicker in his voice, all middle school mockery.

“You two should have seen him when we stopped by El’s house on Sunday,” Will says, chiming in with his own teasing. “I swear, he looked at her like he was a lost, little puppy the entire time.”

“Aww, our little Mikey’s in love,” Lucas says with a coo.

The teasing more than rankles and Mike groans before he lets his head fall forward so it can hit the table they’re all sitting at. God, for as much as he loves them, he really, really hates his friends. It’s bad enough he’s wrestling with how to manage these feelings he has for El that seem to grow exponentially by the day. He doesn’t need the running commentary from the peanut gang along with it. “Guys, please, this is hard enough without you rubbing it in,” he says, the words coming out whiny and petulant.

Dustin lets out a laugh that is just short of a cackle. “Oh, I’m sure it’s hard, but I bet you wouldn’t mind El rubbing it for you,” he says as, except for Mike, everyone else laughs.

The innuendo in Dustin’s voice is lewd and not at all subtle and Mike feels his blood boil. Ok, he takes it back – he’ll gladly deal with the running commentary from his dumbass friends as long as they don’t talk about El like that. And while Mike knows Dustin doesn’t mean to be offensive, Mike’s heard enough of other guys talking about El like this for him to be anything less than livid.

Mike bites back a growl as he sits up, teeth clenched and jaw tight. “Ok, you know what? Meeting fucking adjourned. Everyone out.” He stands up, so fast it almost makes him dizzy, and the flush on his face turns from embarrassment to anger as his blood boils in his veins.

Immediately, there’s a chorus of confused indignation – Dude! – What the fuck! – Oh, c’mom! – but Mike doesn’t care about their hurt feelings as he scoops his backpack up off the floor. “Look,” he says as he looks at each of them squarely. “You can give me shit all you want, ok? But don’t ever talk about her like that.” He pauses, breath hitching. “You know what? Don’t ever talk about anyone like that, actually.”
The looks on the others’ faces are appropriately chastised and apologetic, but Mike’s not really in the mood to be forgiving, not with the way his emotions feel like they’ve completely slipped out of his control. So, he just stares at them, eyes narrows, brows drawn down.

“Mike, man, we’re sorry,” Lucas says, stumbling a bit over the words.

Dustin nods, a little twitchy in his rush to agree with Lucas. “Yeah, we never meant to-”

“Look, it’s fine, ok? Mike says with a sigh, cutting Dustin off as the fight drains out of him. “It’s just – can we just call it a day? It’s, well… it’s been a long one and I just kinda want to go home, now.”

Will looks at him, brow furrowed and lips pinched in a barely-there frown. “Did… did something happen? I mean, you’ve been kind of out of it all afternoon, so…."

Mike nods as the others all start to get up and he digs his keys out of his pocket. “Yeah – and I know it’s going to sound silly, so feel free to make fun of me – but Ms. Palecki assigned me and El to be partners on that stupidly insane all year project for her class and now I have to spend all this time with her and, yeah it’s exciting, but also really, really nerve-wracking and-” Mike manages to get a grip on his rambling by pinching his lips together, but it’s still a near-thing and he can feel all these thoughts and words and feelings piling up behind his lips, waiting to spill out and damn the consequences.

Luckily, though, Will gives Mike a sympathetic look – and, thankfully, Lucas and Dustin don’t do much besides make mournful noises of commiseration. “Look, you don’t have to hold it back with us,” Will says. “We can tell you really like her, you know? And, hey, maybe working with her on this project is gonna be good, give you a chance to really get to know her.”

“And I know she wants the same thing,” Dustin pipes up with, grinning almost ear to ear. “I mean, I didn’t know about the two of you getting paired up for class, so it wasn’t in reference to that, but she likes you, man – told me so, herself.”

Well, if Mike hadn’t already been nervous, that definitely would have done it. He knows what he’s going to be obsessing over for the rest of the evening. “Oh?” is all Mike can say, croaking out the question.

“Plus, there’s the way she looks at you, all goo-goo eyes,” Lucas says. “So, yeah, we might tease you about it – and we didn’t mean to offend you or anything – but we’re rooting for you, man. You got this. And I have a good feeling about her. It’s not like-”

Mike holds up a hand, knowing the name Lucas is about to say and not wanting to hear it. “Don’t say-” He pauses, sighing. “Thanks, though,” he settles on after taking a moment to quell the panic rising in his stomach, wanting to acknowledge the support he’s getting from his friends but feeling a little silly for how all over the place his emotions are – from getting caught up in daydreaming, to embarrassed at getting caught, to the outburst as his friends for their teasing and crude jibes, and then finally to feeling exposed as they showed their support and concern.

Luckily, no one tries to make Mike reconsider ending A/V Club early and it’s not more than a few minutes before they’re all saying their goodbyes. Will climbs into Dustin’s car so Dustin can give him a ride home, Lucas heads off to go spend time with Max, and Mike slides easily into the front seat of the Wheeler station wagon so he can drive home.

He loses his thoughts in listening to a writing podcast he recently found on the way home and zoning out a little while listening to it helps calm his frantic, over-excited nerves. It occurs to Mike only as he pulls up in front of his house not 10 minutes later, though, that he’s going to need to let his mom
know that El’s going to be coming over tomorrow for school work. And, somehow, Mike just *knows* his mom’s going to suss out that he’s going to have a girl coming over, even if nothing is going on between them.

Because Karen Wheeler has a super-power and it’s ferreting out all of Mike’s secrets no matter how hard he tries to hide them.

*Maybe if I just act casual about it…* Mike thinks, thoughts trailing off as he tosses his backpack onto one shoulder and heads inside the house.

*Or maybe you’re fooling yourself,* a more rational, if cynical part of his brain comes back with after Mike’s let himself in. Maybe it’ll be best if he just *tells* his mom first thing, gets it out of the way before she can weasel it out of him.

For a moment, Mike just stands in the entryway, fidgeting with his keys. Off in the distance, he can hear the sounds of the TV playing – one of Holly’s shows, by the sounds of it, all bright, clangorous noises and high-pitched, exaggerated voices – but Mike knows his mom’s probably in the kitchen, so that’s where he heads, shoes and backpack still on.

Karen Wheeler is, indeed, in the kitchen, staring into the open refrigerator with a contemplative look, like if she looks hard enough, she’ll find the answers to the mysteries of the universe, or something. Mike doesn’t exactly move quietly, so he lets the sound of his footsteps announce his arrival and Karen turns to look at him, not at all alarmed.

She smiles at him, all motherly warmth, if a little surprised. “Mike! You’re home early. I thought you had A/V club until 4:30.”

Mike glances at the clock that reads a few minutes after 4:00 and shrugs, a half smile pulling up one corner of his mouth. “Yeah, but we decided to cut it short today.” Well, *he* decided to cut it short and the others agreed, but there’s no need to go into that detail.

Karen’s smile only widens. “Well, you’re just in time to help me figure out what to do for dinner, then. What do you think, pork chops or meatloaf?”

There’s a bright look in his mom’s eye and Mike finds his half-smile turning into a full one. “Meatloaf. *Definitely* your meatloaf.”

Karen lets out a laugh. “Should have known you’d choose that one.” She shakes her head and sighs through her laughter. “Alright, go do your homework.”

“Yes, mom,” Mike says, chortling a bit. Yes, he knows he still needs to tell his mom about El coming over tomorrow, but for the moment, it’s just nice to be home.

This is probably his favorite time of the day when it comes to being at home after school, the hour or so before his dad gets home from work and things get weird with him and his mom, where Karen is still smiles before she’s poured her wine and is still happy to be doing mom-like things like making dinner for her family. Sometimes Mike helps with dinner if he doesn’t have too much homework (or if it’s summer when there *is* no homework), but regardless the house is quiet and calm and Mike can almost pretend he has a normal, unbroken family.

So, with a smile still on his face (and the sinking dread of having to tell his mom about El wrapped around his neck, but that’s an issue for a couple of hours from now), Mike heads upstairs and gets on tackling the mountain of homework he gathered throughout the day.

And, for a couple of hours, Mike lets himself fall into the routine of working through assignments
and checking them off his planner, rote and methodical. It’s only his mom’s voice calling up from downstairs – “Mike, dinner!” – that pulls him from his studies. Well, that and the heavenly smell of his mom’s meatloaf wafting up from the kitchen.

Mike kicks his feet clear of both his desk and his shoes and ambles on downstairs, sock-covered feet thumping hollowly on the stairs. His dad’s already sitting at the head of the table in the dining room, Holly a couple of seats down and fidgeting with her fork, by the time Mike approaches his usual chair. He exchanges a tight smile with his dad, but is spared from having to talk to him directly by Karen breezing into the room, platter of meatloaf in one hand, large bowl of salad in the other.

“So, Mike, how was school today? I didn’t get a chance to ask you,” Karen says after everyone’s served themselves.

Mike freezes with a bite of salad halfway up to his mouth. “Oh, um, it was fine, just – fine.” He knows this is it, knows this is his moment to let his mom know he has someone coming over tomorrow. But just the thought that El’s going to be here tomorrow makes his voice freeze up, throat dry as nerves overtake him.

Karen notices, if the way her face goes from annoyed at Mike’s evasive answer to her question, to curious and concerned. “Honey, everything ok?”

Mike grabs his water glass and takes a large sip. “Um, yeah, everything’s fine. It’s just-” He pauses, taking in a deep breath so he can gather his meager courage. “I, um, I got assigned to a partner for my history class – you know, that big project I was telling you about? – and we’re going to work on it here after school tomorrow.”

“Oh, of course! Who is it? Do I know his parents? I know it’s not one of your usual friends, since you complained endlessly about not being in your honors history class with them.”

And this is the question Mike was afraid Karen was going to ask. Because he cannot lie to her. If he does, she’ll suss it out right quick and then give him the stern Mom look that never fails to make him feel guilty. “Um, maybe? Only, um, my partner’s a girl and her name is El.”

A mischievous look crosses his mom’s face – like anytime there’s a girl involved in his life anywhere – but curiosity still reigns. “Last name, Michael?”

Mike licks his lips, nervous. “Hopper. She’s, um, the new girl who moved to Hawkins. I think her dad’s the police chief.” Ok, that’s a lie. Mike knows for a fact that El’s dad is the police chief. But that would make his mom realize that he pays more attention to the town’s gossip than he’d like to admit (mostly because his mom never stops talking about all the comings and goings in Hawkins and Mike can’t not listen).

Karen’s eyebrows nearly merge with her hairline, she looks so surprised. “The chief’s daughter?” A grin crosses her face. “Well, I’ve seen her with Jim Hopper a few times around town. She’s very pretty.”

The insinuation in his mom’s tone is clear and Mike groans. “Mom, no. It’s not like that. We’re just working together for a class, ok? Anything else is, well… look, it’s just not like that.”

Karen purses her lips. “Well, I don’t see why it couldn’t be like that. You’re a very handsome young man, you know, and very sweet. Any girl would be lucky to have you.”

“Oh, mom,” Mike groans, blushing to the roots of his hair.

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“Ugh, mom,” Mike groans, blushing to the roots of his hair.

Holly chooses this exact moment to pipe up, giggling furiously. “Oooh, Mikey has a crush.”
Oh god, not her too, Mike thinks with a mental whine as he lets his head fall back, eyes slipping shut as he tries to pretend none of this is happening.

“Well, that settles it, then,” Karen says. “You have to ask her to stay for dinner.”

Mike’s head snaps up, alarm pulsing through him. “No, wait, but Mom—”

“No buts, Michael,” Karen says, giving him a stern look. “If you don’t ask her to stay for dinner, I will, understand? And I’m sure you don’t want me to do that in front of you when she gets here, now do you?”

Oh god, is his mom blackmailing him? But, Karen definitely has his number because her asking El to stay for dinner is the literal last thing Mike wants. Honestly, death would be kinder. So he slumps in his seat, feet kicking out petulantly in front of him. “Ugh, fine. I’ll ask her.”

“Good play, son. Always listen to your mother,” Ted says, chiming in for the first time in the entire conversation, sounding nothing less than totally and completely ignorant and disinterested.

Mike wants to glare at his dad, but it’s really easier just to ignore him. After all, besides fathering three children, Mike’s not sure if Ted Wheeler has ever done anything useful in his entire life. Honestly not sure how he even has a job, Mike thinks with a barely disguised sneer.

Dinner moves on from there, but Mike’s obsessing over the realization that, if he’s going to have El stay for dinner so his mom doesn’t ask her, he’s actually going to have to ask her himself.

Ok, fine, I’ll ask her after dinner, Mike resolves with all the enthusiasm one can only get from a freshly-made deadline. Naturally, though, once dinner has ended and he’s back upstairs, all that determination-fueled bravado fades.

Mike stares down at his phone, the text message El sent him earlier staring him back in the face. The four simple words she sent him in history class – hi, this is el – have him frozen, thumb poised above the keyboard to send her a text message, to ask her if she wants to stay for dinner tomorrow.

It occurs to him in this moment, as it has so many times in the past, Mike’s nothing more than the world’s biggest chickenshit. That when it comes to matters of the heart, when it really counts, the steel in Mike’s spine just vanishes and there’s nothing he can do to change that.

But it hurts too much to look at that closely, so Mike doesn’t. I’ll ask her after I finish my Chem homework, Mike thinks, knowing he’s deluding himself and not caring one bit.

His Chem homework comes and goes, along with his English assignment, and Mike still hasn’t summoned up the necessary courage to text El.

Then, it’s just before 10. Mike has somehow finished his homework and now he has no more excuses, nothing left to hide behind. Gonna have to man up, he tells himself as he gets ready for bed – not to sleep, necessarily, but to begin the winding down process at least.

And, yet, no matter how much he dawdles through even something as simple as getting ready for bed, it’s not 5 minutes before he’s laying in bed and faced with a choice: either ask El to stay for dinner tomorrow right now or face having his mother do it for him.

Faced with the choice he never wished for, Mike finds his thumbs finally tapping across his screen as he types out probably the most benign message a guy has ever sent to a girl: hey, my mom wants to
know if you want to stay for dinner tomorrow.

He hits send before he can talk himself out of it and the little ‘delivered’ notification pops up with a finality that makes his heart race out of both excitement and terror. Mike actually managed to text the girl of his dreams, even if it’s about something as lame as passing on an invitation from his mother.

And, with nothing left to do but stare at the screen and watch for El’s reply, he waits.

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El can’t deny it – she’s having a really good day. Especially considering that it’s a Monday, usually the most depressing day of the week.

First, she got to flirt with Mike while talking to him about one of her favorite books – literally, two of her favorite things in one amazing package. It’d been just amazing to let herself get drawn in to talking with Mike, luxuriating in the nerdy back and forth as he told her where he was in the book, how he’d stayed up late reading until he was halfway through and loathe to put it down when he finally gave in to going to bed for the night. Knowing where he was in the book, she’d been all smiles and giggles as he told her what he was enjoying so far – what his favorite parts were, what he was looking forward to – and how he couldn’t wait to get back to reading the rest.

God, just the fact that Mike is enjoying El’s favorite book series, that they can have an actual conversation about it, is more than she ever could have hoped for. Also, the thought that Mike is reading the copy she lent to him, that it’s her book he’s holding as he reads, gives her the most stomach-fluttering tingly feeling ever.

So, first there was that. And then there was Pep Squad practice, which was also fantastic. First, El finally felt like she was getting a handle on the squad’s routines, which is always nice to feel like she’s a lot less lost than she was last week. But what made it even better was what happened after, when El and Jen finally had a chance to talk and apologize to each other after what happened last Thursday.

(“Hey, you want a ride home?” Jen asks as she and El clean up after practice.  

It’s an olive branch – or at least the beginnings of one – and El recognizes it for what it is. And since they were supposed to talk after practice today, El accepts, her own version of the olive branch. “Sure,” El says with a small, but tight smile.

It’s been weird between them today and El’s felt the strain, despite how well the rest of her day has gone. It’s like she and Jen are in some weird friendship limbo and, El’s not going to lie, she kind of really hates it. Especially because El honestly likes Jen and wants to be friends with her. So she wants almost desperately to find a way to fix this.

The ride home is quiet, the mood muted and more than a little awkward. Most of the conversation consists of El giving Jen directions as she sits in the passenger seat of Jen’s tiny, blue coupe, her duffle bag held on her lap while her backpack sits between her feet down in the well.

It’s only when Jen pulls up in front of El’s house that the conversation they’ve been waiting for actually gets going.

There’s a moment of dead silence in the car for about half a second before both El and Jen rush to fill it. “I’m sorry” – “I was an idiot.”
They stare at each other, stunned into silence by their simultaneous admissions, before they dissolve into giggles. “You first,” El gasps out first, between breaths.

It’s a valiant struggle for both of them to calm their laughter, but they manage after a bit. “Like I said, I was an idiot,” Jen says. “It really shouldn’t matter who you like. The heart wants what the heart wants and, if it’s Mike you want, then the only person who should care about that is you.”

“And I shouldn’t have snapped at you just because my feelings were hurt,” El says, arms tightening around her duffle bag. “That’s not how friends express their disappointment.”

Jen smiles, soft and sweet. “I’m glad we’re still friends,” she says, voice barely audible even in the quiet of the car.

“We, too,” El says as the breath rushes out of her in a sigh.

Jen quirks an eyebrow, playful warning in her gaze. “You do know that, if anything happens between you and Mike, no one’s going to understand, right? It’s, like, nerds and popular girls do not go together.”

“Well, like you said, it’s no one’s business but mine.” El pauses, thinking. “And Mike’s, I suppose.”

“Well, that is true, I guess,” Jen says. She giggles, rolling her eyes. “And I suppose, if you forced me to say, that you and Mike would probably, maybe be pretty cute together.”

El laughs. “Well, I happen to think so, too, so thanks for the validation.”

The two talk a bit more, the mood much lighter with the drama cleared out of the way, and El goes inside a few minutes later as Jen drives home, feeling like all the weight has finally been lifted off her shoulders.

But what’s really putting her in a fantastic mood – the amazing cap to an already amazing day – is getting paired up with Mike for US History, that she gets to spend time with him outside of school all year, that she gets to go over to his house tomorrow and be with him with no one else around.

Yes, it’s for school related purposes, true. But that can’t dampen her excitement – not in the slightest.

El feels like she’s floating the entire evening, so much so that even Hop called her out on it, proclaiming with a wary and curious tone that “well, you’re in a good mood” when they sat down for dinner a few hours ago. El hadn’t been able to lie, but she deftly maneuvered her way out of explaining the source of her mood, not wanting her dad to know quiet yet about this... thing with Mike.

But that was all before her phone buzzed with an incoming text message a couple minutes before 10. And then El’s day went from amazing to fucking spectacular.

Because the text message? It’s from Mike asking her if she wants to stay for dinner tomorrow. And El’s heart almost explodes with happiness.

Ok, yeah, sure, it’s him asking for his mom, but still. He texted her, of his own accord, and El’s as giddy as a middle schooler with her first crush, all “oh, he noticed me!” and barely suppressing her own urge to giggle wildly as she lies in bed.

For a moment, El just stares at the text message, almost unable to believe that Mike actually texted her, even if it is just to pass on an invitation for dinner.
God, this should not be making her feel this giddy and untethered, but it is and El doesn’t care. Not when it feels this good to be this happy.

El reads the text message a second time, and then a third and fourth time, lower lip held between her teeth to try and contain her smile, which is reaching seriously out-of-control proportions. And, before El’s even fully aware that she’s doing so, her fingers are tapping across the keyboard of her phone like they have a mind of their own, her brain trying to catch up just as she hits “send”.

And, when she realizes what she’s done, she blushes.

*i would love to have dinner at your house. but i hope you want me to have dinner there, too,* is what El sends back, complete with a couple of emoji hearts for good measure. There’s no way to hide that she was flirting, not at all, and El’s desperately curious to see how and if Mike responds.

A gasp sticks in El’s throat as she sees the three little dots that means Mike is texting her back and El swears she’s never wanted to receive a reply more than she does right in this moment. There’s what looks like a couple of stops and starts – the dots disappearing and then reappearing not once, but twice, her heart all but stopping each time from the disappointment – but about a minute later, El receives a reply back.

*well... why wouldn’t i?* is the text message and it’s accompanied by a winking smiley face, the emoji of choice for flirting over text messages everywhere.

El can’t help it – she actually squeals, phone clutched to her chest right above her racing heart. She wonders if Mike’s feeling the same way she is in this moment – ecstatic and lovesick and just so, so happy. She tries to imagine what he’s up to, if he’s laying in bed just like she is, smiling up at his phone just like she is.

God, that sounds like a dream come true.

*well, good, wouldn’t want to be where i’m not wanted, she types out. see you tomorrow! and looking forward to spending time with you!* El ups her emoji game, sending the one blowing a kiss, and she decides that her heart can’t take waiting to see if he has a reply.

No, just the barest hint of him flirting back with her via text message has El all twitterpated and if Mike responds back with something equally and blatantly flirty, she’s not sure if her heart will be able to take it give how worked up she is right now.

*Maybe there is such a thing as too much of a good thing,* El thinks as she hurries to turn on “do not disturb” before she sets her alarm and locks her phone.

El doesn’t go to bed right away, but it’s not too much longer until she’s crawling beneath the covers, lights all switched off. Excitement runs through her veins, all anticipation for the day coming her way tomorrow, where she gets to spend time alone with the boy she desperately likes, the one who seems to be more and more open to flirting back, the one who might actually like her back.

It takes El awhile to fall asleep, but she does, eventually, mind whirling with images of what could be, what she hopes might happen.

And she falls asleep with a smile on her face.

Chapter End Notes
So, I do apologize that this is yet another set-up chapter, but I really didn't want to go too much longer without updating and this was a good stopping point as any given what's coming up next.

And, speaking of that, be prepared for Mike and El to FINALLY spend some time alone together that lasts more than a couple of minutes. Plus, El having dinner at the Wheelers? With Karen all excited and nosy-nellie about the whole thing? Oh, you bet that's going to be fun......

Stay tuned for what's coming up next and, in the meantime, come bug me over on tumblr at @fatechica. Catch y'all on the flip side!
guess who's coming to dinner?

Chapter Notes

Haha, so, um, whoops? I honestly never meant to go 5 weeks without updating this fic. But I went on vacation and then got sick and then recently started teaching, so my free time and energy dwindled to nothing. But, I never stopped working on this and I never intend to stop working on this. So I hope y'all like this chapter - a lot of sweat, blood, and tears (metaphorically speaking) went into getting this one done. So enjoy!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s all the fault of those damn little heart emojis. *That and the little emoji blowing a kiss*, Mike thinks with a strange, excited groan as he gets ready for school Tuesday morning. His phone’s with him in the bathroom and within arms’ reach as he gets dressed, so it’s no trouble at all to look at the very short text history between him and El.

(Literally short as they’ve only exchanged, by Mike’s count, 5 text messages.)

*i hope you want me to have dinner there, too* followed by those heart emojis sends Mike’s heart rate skyrocketing up into the stratosphere each time he reads it. And her whole *looking forward to spending time with you* with a blown kiss makes Mike feel like he’s losing his damn mind.

It’s no wonder he flirted back in his responding text message (though he hadn’t been brave enough to respond to the last message from El, not when his heart had nearly stopped at the thought of her blowing him a kiss). It’s also equally no wonder that Mike slept terribly last night because he Could Not Stop thinking about tonight, about how El’s going to be in his house, the two of them most likely alone….

*And she was flirting with him via text message.* Which means it was deliberate, *purposeful*. Flirting in person is fleeting, in the moment and often purely reactionary, not entirely a conscious act. But flirting in text message? Where there’s a paper trail, knowingly leaving a *record* that it actually happened? That means it’s *real*. A pretty, popular girl like El doesn’t send flirty text messages to nerds like Mike (and risk it getting out) unless she means it.

Which means that El is truly, honestly flirting with him. When she gives him those coy smiles or flutters her lashes at him or laughs and giggles at his stupid jokes, she’s being *sincere*.

Whether or not it means that El’s interested in anything more than flirting remains to be seen. Though some of the remarks she’s made to Mike over the past couple of weeks certainly seem to point in that direction and if she’s being genuine about her flirting, then Mike has no reason to believe that she also isn’t being genuine about that either.

But Mike really doesn’t want to presume unless he has solid, concrete evidence to back it up. For the moment, though, just the fact that El sees something in him that’s worth flirting with, that she’s interested in him enough for *that*… well, that’s feels pretty fucking amazing.

As a result, Mike spends way too long figuring out what to wear. He eventually settles on a pair of black jeans and a dark green sweater that he knows he looks at least decent in, but isn’t too heavy for this time of year. He runs some water through his hair with his fingers to try and impose some sense
of order on its unruly nature. And he barely manages to talk himself out of putting on some of the cologne he swears Nancy gifted to him as a lark last Christmas. After all, there’s a fine line between too much and just enough and Mike doesn’t want to be on the wrong side of that line.

Still, he heads downstairs feeling pretty good about himself, even as he’s hoping that he doesn’t look so out of the ordinary that his mom notices. Because while he wants to make sure that if El is interested in him, he might as well try to give her something decent to look at, if his mom notices him taking care with his outfit, it’s officially Too Much and Too Desperate.

So, naturally, it’s the first thing Karen notices when Mike makes his appearance at the breakfast table.

His dad’s nowhere to be seen (probably left early for the office, again), but Karen and Holly are both there. Holly’s happily munching on a piece of toast and Karen’s reading something on her phone while she sips at a cup of coffee. There’s a full plate of eggs, bacon, and toast that is waiting for Mike and his stomach grumbles even as he detours over to the kitchen counter for a cup of coffee.

Karen looks up from her phone at the sound of Mike’s footsteps and Mike can see the pleased confusion spreading across his mom’s face. “Well, don’t you look nice today?”

Mike cringes mid-pour of his cup of coffee and almost gives in to the urge to run upstairs so he can change, suddenly feeling like he’s trying too hard. But a quick glance at the clock shows that he doesn’t have the time. Hell, he barely has time to finish breakfast and make it to homeroom before the bell rings, at this point.

So Mike swallows down the panic rising up inside of him and, with his coffee, heads over to where his breakfast is waiting for him. “Morning, Mom,” he says, mumbling the greeting as he sits down.

Only, getting closer to his mom gives her a better chance to get a good look at him. “And, did you do your hair?”

At this point, it’s all Mike can do to keep a straight face. “Not really,” he says, shrugging one shoulder in what he hopes is casual dismissal.

But, his mom can see right through him and Karen just smiles. “This is about that girl, isn’t it? The one coming over tonight?” Mike doesn’t say anything, but the blush that creeps up his face answers for him and he looks away as he starts digging into his breakfast. “Did you ask her to stay for dinner?” Karen follows up with.

“Yeah,” Mike says around a mouthful of food, swallowing before he continues answering. “She’ll be here for dinner.”

“Oh, good,” Karen says. “I was thinking of making lasagna, so that’ll be nice.”

Even though Mike’s eating breakfast, his mouth still waters at the thought of his mom’s lasagna, which she only makes when company comes over since, apparently, “it’s a lot of work, Michael,” even though it’s one of his favorite things his mom makes (so she’ll make it for guests, but not for her son).

Mike doesn’t say anything about that, though, as he continues eating his breakfast, hoping that if he doesn’t engage in the conversation, his mom will move on to something else.

Thankfully, it works and Mike’s able to finish his breakfast in peace. But he’s suddenly very, very nervous about today.
(Ok, not suddenly, but he’s painfully aware of it now.)

Mike’s just a bundle of nerves as he drives to school, wondering what it’s going to be like once he sees El again, wondering if she’ll notice or appreciate how he’s dressed, hoping that he hasn’t gone too far or made it too weird. He wonders how he’s going to handle meeting up with her after Cross Country practice so he can drive the two of them to his house, how he’s going to cope with being alone with her in his car and then at his house, where they’ll probably hole up in the basement all by themselves.

And then he’s going to have to manage having her sit through dinner with his family, praying to any god he can think of that his parents won’t horribly embarrass him (and that he won’t embarrass himself along with it). The cherry on top of all of it will be him having to drive El home and trying not to pretend like it’s similar to him dropping her off after a date. Because it’s not a date, not at all, only his heart is a stupid, stupid creature full of desperate and eternal hope that Mike can’t seem to quash.

Honestly, it’s a miracle Mike doesn’t crash his car on the way to school, he’s so nervous.

To make matters worse, Mike doesn’t know if it helps or hurts when he finally does see El at school later that morning. Because El’s just so gorgeous, it robs him of his ability to think.

Today, El’s wearing a dark blue sleeveless dress, hem of the swishy skirt hitting a couple of inches above her knees and a square neckline that shows off the sweep of her collarbones and the smooth skin of her neck. She’s paired it with a sheer white blouse, left unbuttoned with the ends tied around her slim waist. And her hair’s half pulled up, leaving her face unobscured, but still leaving luxurious honey chestnut locks to spill freely down her shoulders and back.

El’s beautiful and captivating and Mike’s just enthralled. And when she sees him in return as they meet up in Trig halfway through the morning, the smile she gives him sets his soul aflame. The few minutes they spend chatting before the bell rings are filled with El’s bright, easy smile and her quippy, yet flirtatious conversation.

Mike tries to keep up, but it’s impossible, it seems, when he’s as taken with her as he is. In the end, he’s just lucky he doesn’t do something stupid and embarrasses himself like blurting out that he’s falling for her or something equally exposing like that.

The day just floats by, it seems, Mike’s brain clouded by thoughts of El. Every moment he spends with her, even just in class, feels like a gift, one he’s blessed to receive. He can barely keep his eyes off of her during lunch as she eats with the Photography kids only a couple of tables away and not even teasing remarks from the rest of the Party can get him to stop glancing over at her what feels like every few seconds or so.

Mike isn’t sure how he makes it through Cross Country practice once the school day is over, but he manages not to trip over his own two feet as distracted as he is by the knowledge that, in less than an hour, he and El are going to be driving to his house where he’ll spend the rest of the evening with her and oh my god he’s not ready.

But, despite how not ready he is, it’s just before 4:15. Cross Country practice is over, he’s showered and dressed, and there’s nothing left for him to do but go and meet El wherever she’s waiting in the parking lot. There’s nothing left he can do to stall, to give him a couple more minutes to try and prepare himself and calm down a little.

Right, you’re deluding yourself if you think you’ll ever be ready, the self-critical portion of his brain pipes up with and Mike realizes the voice is right. He’s never going to be calm and all ready when it...
comes to El. So he might as well suck it up and head out there, already.

Mike heads out of the boys’ locker room, leaving behind the cacophony of guys from Football and Mike’s fellow Cross Country teammates cleaning up after practice, all whooping laughs and chaotic conversations. It isn’t a long walk from the locker room to the parking lot – a couple minutes at most seeing how it’s not a very big campus – and the cooling afternoon air feels nice on Mike’s overheated face as he walks outside, cheeks flushed from both his shower and his nerves.

The parking lot’s mostly empty as most of the students and teachers have already gone home for the day. So it’s not hard at all to spot where El is sitting on one of the benches in the student pick-up area. The benches are arranged in an L-shape and El’s sitting on one that lets her face the entrance Mike just walked out of, like she wants to make sure she won’t miss him coming to meet up with her.

But, despite the fact that El’s facing the door, she’s not actually looking in his direction. Instead, her head’s bowed down so she can read the thick book propped open in her lap, legs folded up on the bench seat despite the fact that she’s wearing a dress.

Whatever she’s reading, El looks absolutely enthralled to be doing so and it’s one of the most beautiful sights Mike’s ever seen. He desperately wishes she would look at him like the same way she’s currently looking at her book (even though he’s not sure if his heart could take that), but he still appreciates being able to look at her when she looks like this, gorgeous and beautiful and completely content to live in the moment.

Mike honestly thinks he could stand here forever just staring at her and be perfectly happy with only that. But there’s places to be and work to be done and both of those things requires the two of them to get a move on.

So, Mike squares his shoulders, draws in one final deep and steadying breath, and begins the short walk to where El is sitting and waiting for him….

Unaware, the entire time, that he and El are being watched.

Honestly, El’s surprised she’s even able to concentrate on something as quaint as reading, given how she’s spent all day feeling like she’s going to jump out of her skin with excitement.

Naturally, that excitement has translated into over-the-top, giddy flirtatiousness whenever she’s with Mike. And she’d be way more worried about how the rest of the day is going to go over if Mike hadn’t seemed not just totally open to her flirting, but also flirting back with her in that totally shy, adorable way of his.

So, yeah, El’s really excited, almost distractingly so. But then school gets out and she has an hour where she knows she has to at least try and keep herself occupied to pass the time. So, she settles down on one of the benches in the student pick-up area, angled so she can keep an eye on the entrance doors, and pulls out the book she’s in the middle of reading, a paperback novel version of “The Historian”, which she’s absolutely loving.

It’s a testament to how into the story she is that El loses herself in her book, the hour flying by as her impatient excitement temporarily fades into the background. In many ways, it’s a perfect afternoon. The world around her all but ceases to exist, especially as the parking lot empties of both cars and
people – it’s just her and her book and the gentle heat of the late afternoon sunshine.

It’s the sound of Mike’s voice that all but startles El out of her reverie. “Hey, El,” he calls out to her, voice sounding only a few feet away.

Heart leaping into her throat, El hurries to lift her head up from her book to look at Mike, the beginnings of a smile pulling up the corners of her lips. “Mike, hi!” God, did that sound breathless? Because it felt breathless, like the sheer sight of this boy has driven all the air from her lungs and she can no longer remember how to breathe.

_Honestly, can you blame me? Just look at him_, El thinks, giving Mike a once over she doesn’t even bother trying to be sneaky about. God, he looks good enough to eat, with those black jeans and that dark green fitted sweater, his hair damp from the shower she presumes he took after practice, black strands slicked back and just starting to go wild.

Seriously, if Mike was trying to dress to impress today, he fucking succeeded because El has _not_ been able to keep her eyes off him today (not that she really minds, because looking at Mike is rapidly becoming one of her favorite things, but it’s a little distracting when she’s supposed to, y’know, _be paying attention in class_).

Mike gives her a look that is part bashful, part pleased and a nervous smile plays along the gentle sweep of his mouth. “Hope it wasn’t too boring waiting here,” he says as he finishes approaching, stopping what feels like only inches away (though El really wouldn’t mind if he were even _closer_).

“Not at all,” El says, holding up her book as she dog-ears the page she’s on. “Have book, will travel’, is one of my life mottos.”

Curious, Mike peers over to look at the cover of the El’s book, head tilting just so adorably, El almost can’t handle it. “The Historian’? What’s it about?”

“Dracula, I think? Or people looking for the true history of Dracula,” El says with a little shrug. “I’m still working my way through it.”

Mike nods like he knows exactly what she’s talking about, even though she can see on his face that he doesn’t. “Well, it must be good – you looked like you were really into it just a moment ago.”

There’s that flutter in her heart again, the one that makes her stomach feel like she’s just gone over the drop of a roller coaster, the one she always gets when Mike says something that lets her know he’s been noticing her, _paying attention to her_. “Well, the writing’s just amazing, so it’s easy to get sucked in. I can lend this one to you when I’m finished, if you like.”

“Maybe,” Mike says with a smirk that does indescribable things to her heart; it’s almost rakish and El just about swoons. “I think you’re on a mission to make me like all the things you like.”

“And would that be so bad?” El asks, eyebrow arched coyly as she gets to her feet, her own smirk toying along the lines of her mouth.

The grin on Mike’s face turns a little bashful and the combination is almost too much. El wants to kiss that smile off Mike’s lips and _never stop_. El’s sure that desire is written across every inch of her face, but if Mike notices, he doesn’t show it. “Well, shall we?” he asks.

“We shall,” El says with a broad smile. “As much as I’d love to stand here and just talk–” _At the very least._ “–we have work to do.” She pauses, smile turning almost manic as she bounces on her heels. “Plus, dinner,” she adds in a sing-song voice.
“Oh god,” Mike says with a roll of his eyes as he wordlessly gestures for her to follow him to his car, which turns out to be a station wagon that’s about 10 years old, if El had to guess (though she knows nothing about cars). “Fair warning, my mom is maybe too excited you’re staying for dinner.”

El arches her eyebrows. “‘Too excited’?” she echoes in confusion.

A blush creeps up Mike’s cheeks, acute and palpable in its embarrassment. “It’s just….” He trails off and, for half a second, El’s not sure if he’s going to continue. But, then, he does. “You’re a girl,” he finally chokes out. “And my mom—”

El immediately understands what Mike’s getting at and her breath leaves her in a high-pitched giggle. “Oh, I see,” she says. Mike’s mom seems to think that there’s something maybe going on between Mike and El, and Mike’s mom isn’t even entirely wrong.

Or, at least, El hopes she isn’t.

“She just assumes a lot that isn’t necessarily there,” Mike continues, the words coming out of his mouth in a tumbled rush. “Like, just because you’re a girl, she’s jumping to conclusions that—”

“Mike,” El interrupts, cutting him off mid-ramble. She hasn’t known him long, but El has already learned it’s best to stop Mike’s rambling before he really picks up steam. But she still offers him a small, apologetic smile as they part around the car. “It’s not a bad conclusion for your mom to jump to,” she says, voice heavy with meaning.

Mike, who’d been fumbling to get his keys out of his pocket, freezes as he looks at her across the roof of his car, his eyes wide as the meaning of her words fully sinks in. “Oh,” is all he can say, like what she’s said has broken his brain.

El giggles again, unable to help herself – really, he’s just too cute. “You, uh, gonna unlock the car?” El asks, a gently teasing grin on her face.

The blush on Mike’s face that had just faded reignites in a sudden rush and he startles into a frenzy of motion. “Oh shit, yeah, uh sorry.” He unlocks the car with a couple presses of the key fob and then opens his door, prompting El to do the same with hers, and they both duck down to climb into the dar.

“Sorry about my car,” Mike says as they both close their doors and get their things settled. “I know it’s not the coolest car or anything, but it’s what my parents gave me.”

El glances over as she’s reaching for her seatbelt, her heart squeezing almost painfully at the ashamed cringe on Mike’s face, like he’s bracing himself for her to look down at him for the kind of car he drives, which she would never, ever do. “Hey, you have one up on me,” El says with what she hopes is a gentle, reassuring smile. “I don’t even have a car.” She pauses as a thought hits her and a small, self-deprecating laugh bubbles out of her. “In fact, you have two up on me. Not only do I not have a car, I don’t even have my license.”

“You don’t?” Mike throws her a quizzical look while he starts the car.

“Never needed to drive in New York,” El says with a shrug, watching with fascination as Mike cranes his neck to look behind him so he can back out of the parking spot he’s in. There’s something attractive – almost, dare she say it, sexy about the way his hand braces against the back of her seat, the way the lines of his neck stand out in stark contracts, tendons popping out from beneath the surface of his skin from how his head is turned. El finds herself desperately wanting to trace the lines of his neck and jaw with her fingers, her lips, her tongue, and the way the heat begins to build in her
veins makes that urge almost impossible to ignore.

And, beside her, Mike is entirely oblivious to the way he’s getting her all hot and bothered. *Damn him.* “Yeah, I guess that makes sense, what with the subway and all,” Mike says, a little distracted, as he finishes backing out. “Think you’ll learn how to drive now that you live in Hawkins?”

“If my dad finds the time to teach me,” El says, rolling her eyes as she settles into her seat. “Being a cop doesn’t exactly leave him rolling in free time.”

Mike throws her a look as he puts the car in to drive. “What’s it like having a cop for a dad, anyway?”

“You got two hours to spare?” El asks, her voice wry as she huffs a sigh.

“You got 10 minutes before we get to my house, max,” Mike says. He glances over at her, a smirk on his lips. “Best I can offer.”

El finds herself mirroring Mike’s smirk, the amusement flowing easily back and forth between them. “I suppose it’ll have to do,” she says with barely contained giggles in her voice.

They spend the short ride from school to Mike’s home like this. El regales Mike with the Cliff Notes version of growing up as her father’s daughter – the weird hours, spending too much time at her dad’s precinct, the strange extended family that formed around her by her dad’s fellow detectives and other cops, the self-defense classes and pervasive underlying sense of heightened awareness.

Mike does his part, making all the appropriate reaction noises, peppering El’s story with remarks (quirky and snarky by equal measure), and asking questions that keep El talking. El can tell by the tilt of Mike’s head, the way he keeps glancing over at her, that he’s interested, *invested,* in what she has to say.

El’s not afraid to admit that Mike’s interest isn’t just intoxicating, it’s *addicting.* She finds herself leaning into his regard, eager to do whatever it takes to keep his attention on her. It’s dangerous, El knows, to feel this way about a boy. But, in the moment, she just doesn’t care – not when it feels this good.

The best part is that there’s no awkwardness, no talking over each other or pauses that are held a little too long. The words flow back and forth easily between them, like they’ve always been like this, talking and happy and having a good time. It’s honestly more than El ever could have hoped for.

The entire time, though, despite how *in the moment* El is, she’s making note of the way to Mike’s house, trying her best to commit the route to memory. She also can’t deny she’s a little (ok, a lot) eager to see where Mike lives, to get a sense of the place he calls ‘home’.

Mike finally turns them down a cul-de-sac and El pauses mid-story about how she went “trick or treating” around all the desks at her dad’s precinct when she was 6, to let out a bright giggle. “Oh, you live on a cul-de-sac, too!” she blurts out, hands clapping together near her face.

Mike gives her a wry, amused look as he pulls up in front of a two-story house. “Like, half of this town is cul-de-sacs, so it’s not too unusual.”

“Oh,” El squeaks out as a fierce blush pops across her cheeks. “Sorry, just–” Her mouth works as she tries to find a way to ease herself out of her embarrassment.

“Don’t apologize,” Mike says as he puts the car into park. “It’s a good thing that you get excited about stuff.” He kills the engine with a flick of his wrist. “Better than being cynical about
A thousand butterflies take flight in El’s stomach at the compliment. “Thanks,” she says, even as she’s still a little embarrassed at getting overly excited to have something in common with Mike (even something as silly as both of them living on a cul-de-sac), only to find that it’s not that special at all.

El resolutely pushes the incident to the back of her mind – what’s the point in dwelling over it when it won’t change anything? – and pulls her backpack up into her lap from where it’s been sitting in the footwell. She looks over at Mike to see him looking back at her, the expression on his face somehow both inscrutable and awed all at the same time, like he’s amazed by her and won’t give her any indication as to why. “So, this is your house?” El asks, quirking her head in the direction of the building that’s behind her.

“Oh, um, yeah, that’s my house,” Mike says, blinking like he’s trying to bring him back to his senses. “We should, uh, head inside.” He gives her a shy smile. “No sense in sitting in the car, right?”

“Right,” El says with a definitive nod and a giggle in her voice. There’s not much talking as they get out of the car and walk towards the front door, which gives El a chance to take in the house in front of her. Two story, brick wrapped around the entirety of the outside of the first floor, large windows evenly spaced across each floor, back of the house almost butting up against the edge of the woods except for the grassy slope that leads off from the backyard.

It’s not quite a sprawling house, but it’s almost twice as big as El’s house and much bigger than anything she’s lived in before back in New York. Everything’s well kept and neat – trimmed hedges, plants lining the walkway, lawn mowed, no peeling paint or discoloration – the perfect picture of domesticity.

Which just makes El wonder what secrets it hides. Because, as she’s well aware of, this much perfection is just a facade, a cover-up to keep eyes off the ugliness beneath. After all, all families are fucked up in their own way, right?

Mike unlocks the front door and steps aside after crossing the threshold to let her in, hanging back as El moves into the entryway so he can close the door behind her. There’s a hush that comes over her, reverent and still, as El gets her first look inside Mike’s house. Off in the distance, she can hear the murmur of the television through the wall, the bustle of someone moving around in what she assumes is the kitchen. It’s homey, the sounds of people waiting for you when you get home, the knowledge someone’s there to talk to about your day once you walk in through the front door.

It’s something El hasn’t had since her mother left and the ache of it pierces her heart with such suddenness, it’s a miracle she doesn’t gasp out loud.

But now’s not the time to dwell on old wounds, wounds that will never fully heal.

So, putting on a smile, El turns back to Mike and hooks her thumbs into the straps of her backpack. “So, care to give me the tour?”
anything tour-worthy about his house, but El made it sound like there is, so…).

He just can’t help it as he stares at her, though. *El Hopper is in his house.* Like, *holy shit.* It feels like his two worlds are colliding and it’s just hitting him right in this moment that it’s actually happening. El’s standing there in the entryway of his house, looking ethereally beautiful as always, almost out of place in the settings he finds oh so familiar.

God, he really could just stare at her forever and never get bored. It’s like, every time he looks at her, he finds something new that enchants him, some little detail that makes his heart feel like it’s about to explode in his chest from how fast it’s beating. This time, it’s the slope of her nose, the way the gentle, narrow bridge leads down to the cute-as-a-button tip.

He can so easily picture himself running a finger down the ridge of her nose, tapping the tip of it before replacing his finger with his lips in a soft kiss. The image is so poignant, so full of yearning, that Mike finds it almost impossible to resist, every fiber of his being aching to make the sweet fantasy a reality.

But he does resist, breaking free of the fantasy (for the moment, that is) with a mental shake. “Sure, I’ll give you the tour, but it’s not much,” Mike says with what he knows is a shy smile. (Honestly, his house is nothing special and it’s both baffling and flattering in equal measures that El wants him to show her around.)

But, before he can so much as decide where to start, he spots movement out of the corner of his eye down near the entrance to the kitchen. And, almost immediately, his heart drops into his stomach. Oh god, it’s his mom.

Karen first pokes her head out from the kitchen, leaning out *just so* with an inquisitive smile on her face. “Mike, sweetheart, is that you?” The term of endearment makes Mike cringe, his stomach squirming as a blush spreads hot over his cheeks.

Mike swallows down the knot of embarrassment that’s lodged in his throat as his mom fully emerges from the kitchen to head over wo where he and El are still standing by the front door. He spares a moment to glance over at El, silently pleading with her not to think less of him because of his overbearing mother, before looks back at his mom with a tight smile. “Hi, Mom.”

Karen gives him a fond smile before looking at El, beaming almost blindingly. “And you must be El.” she wipes her hand on the apron she’s wearing and holds it out for El to shake. “Apologies if I’m a little bit of a mess – I’m in the middle of cooking dinner.”

El takes his mom’s hand and gives it a brief shake. “It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Wheeler. Thanks for letting me stay for dinner.”

Karen simply *fawns* under the gratitude, letting out a girlish giggle that makes Mike want to *die* with how over-the-top it is. “Oh, anytime! And please—” His mom’s voice dips down to a conspiratorial whisper. “Call me ‘Karen’.”

El laughs, the sound light and breezy and effortless. “I’ll try.”

“It’s so nice to meet one of Mike’s friends. He hasn’t told me *anything* about you,” Karen says like Mike isn’t in the same room.

“I’m right here, you know,” Mike grumbles, wishing he could will away the blush that’s still heating up his cheeks. “Anyway, I’m gonna show El around a bit before we get to work.”
Karen arches an eyebrow, well aware that her son is trying to get rid of her, but she just smiles in acknowledgement. “Well, I’ll be in the kitchen if you need anything and I’ll holler once dinner’s ready. It really is nice to meet you, El.”

“Likewise,” El says, all charm. “And thank you, again.”

“So polite,” Karen says, wry humor in her voice. “Now, if only you could pass some of that off to my son.”

“Ugh, Mom!” Mike groans, his head rolling back in exasperation as El giggles. “Please.”

“Alright, alright, I’m going.” Karen says, holding up placating hands in surrender before she turns and heads back to the kitchen.

Mike looks back over at EL, both pleased and embarrassed to see her looking so amused. “Sorry about my mom,” he says, the words a bit mumbled.

The smile El gives him is warm and reassuring and he knows he doesn’t deserve it. “She just cares. It’s sweet.”

There’s something sad in El’s voice and it takes Mike a moment to realize that, for as much as El’s talked about her dad, there’s been no mention of her mom. Suddenly, he feels like an ungrateful heel and his stomach sours under the force of the shame he feels, sharp and heavy. “I guess,” is the concession Mike gives, not wanting to linger on this any longer if it’s a source of pain for El. “Lemme show you around,” he says a second later, trying to sound more upbeat than he feels. “Then, after that, I was thinking we could head down to the basement to work. It’s one of the quietest parts of the house.”

El arches an eyebrow in what Mike can only guess is amused skepticism and something about that expression sends shivers down his spine. “Is this the intro to a horror movie? Should I be afraid? I am a white girl, after all. We tend to die first in horror movies.”

For a moment, Mike’s horrified, but then he notices the teasing smile on El’s face and he gives her a flat look as his heart rate slows back down from panicked to normal. “Oh, ha, ha, very funny.”

El giggles, biting her lip coyly. “I thought it was hilarious.”

El’s teasing joke, and his utter lack of ability to find the humor in it, helps cut through Mike’s nervousness. “Well, then, Miss Comedian, let me show you around.”

The tour mainly consists of Mike showing El around the first floor – the living room and dining room, a brief peek into the kitchen – and it ends when they poke their heads into the family room. Holly’s in there watching cartoons, but she doesn’t even bother deigning to turn around to say hi.

“...and that lump glued to the TV is my little sister,” Mike says as he finishes letting El get a look at the family room. He turns and begins leading them towards the basement, El falling easily in step by his side.

“Aww, I didn’t know you had a sister!” El coos, grinning. “I always wanted a sister.”

Mike chuckles. “Well, I have two, so you’re welcome to take one of them.” At El’s quizzical look, he explains. “My other sister, Nancy, is older. She’s off at Columbia for college.”

It’s El’s turn to laugh. “Ah, so you’re the middle child. No wonder you’re so prickly,” she says, grinning to let him knows she’s not being mean (and when did he start to be able to read El’s
expressions?).

Still, despite the fact that he knows she’s teasing, Mike finds himself scowling, defensive hackles rising before he can stop them. “Hey, now! I am not-” He presses his lips together and narrows his eyes at El, who’s still grinning up at him like Christmas came early. “Ok, you might have a point,” he concedes as he approaches the door down to the basement.

“I always have a point,” El says as they start heading down, Mike ahead of her, their footsteps thudding on the hollow steps. “The sooner you learn that, the happier we’ll both be.”

“Uh-huh, sure,” Mike says. He steps aside as he reaches the bottom and watches as El descends the last couple of steps. He watches as she looks across the large basement, her eyes taking everything in, and he squirms a bit as he looks out as well, trying to see what El might be seeing from her point of view.

There’s the couch straight ahead, a little ratty but still comfortable – Mike spends way more time than he’d like to admit hanging out on that couch. There’s the large card table where he and the Party sometimes still play D&D, but also where Mike tends to do his homework; it’s cleared off, at the moment, a move Mike made late last night as he realized it could be where he and El decide to settle in to work.

Then there’s the rest of the basement, full of discarded furniture that once was upstairs and his mom has since replaced, but didn’t want to get rid of: the coffee table in front of the couch, the sideboard table by the door to the outside, the low bookshelves where Mike keeps his video games and movies, the old TV stand (with an older flat screen TV) to the right of the stairs, angled so the screen can be seen from the couch.

It’s mismatched and a little cluttered, but it’s home, the place Mike feels the most comfortable besides his bedroom. He’s aware, suddenly and very keenly, that he feels very exposed, like his whole soul and inner workings are visible for El to see – to see and judge.

Gulping down the nervousness that threatens to send him screaming from the room, Mike looks back over at El, breath held as he waits to see what her reaction is to this space that is so quintessentially him. “So, what do you think?”

It only takes a moment after El looks back at him for her reaction to become clear and, for a little bit, Mike doesn’t think he’s ever going to breathe ever again. Everything’s on the line, now, and this could either make or break everything. But then she meets his eyes and the most beautiful smile spreads across her lips, soft and oh so gentle. “It’s nice, Mike. Nice and cozy.” Her smile widens, enough to show the whites of her teeth. “I like it, it’s homey.”

The relief that rushes through him almost makes him sway where he’s standing, but Mike manages to hold on. Oh god, she likes it. “Good, that’s, uh, that’s good.” He spares another glance around the room as he goes to put his backpack down on the coffee table, the closest flat surface. “So, um, why don’t you get settled wherever you like and I’ll, uh, go and grab some drinks and snacks and stuff.” He pauses, tongue flashing out to wet his lips as his nervousness swells again. “Anything specific you’d want?”

Mike’s question is rewarded with another one of those gorgeous, brilliant smiles and, it’s official: his heart’s never going to recover from all the beat skipping it’s doing. “Whatever you think is good,” El says. “I trust you.”

Oh god, she means it, doesn’t she? She actually trusts him. Yep, he’s a goner. “Oh, ok, um, yeah,” Mike manages to stutter out. “I’ll, uh, be right back, then. Just – I won’t be long.”
“I’ll be here,” El says, giggling a little (and, god, Mike hopes she’s giggling because she finds him cute, not because she thinks he’s lame).

Mike gives her one last, tight grin before he turns to head back up the stairs, heart racing and pounding. Seriously, he’s going to die of a heart attack by the time he’s 17, with all the weird contortions the traitorous little organ’s been pulling the past few weeks. Maybe, one day, he’ll be able to be in El’s presence without his heart doing enough acrobatics to rival the circus.

Pfft, yeah right. Face it, Wheeler, you’re a sucker for a pretty face. That pretty face.

Mike plods his way into the kitchen, feeling both hopeful and resigned and nervous all at the same time, only to find his mom standing at the island, slicing up loaves of French bread, butter and garlic nearby and ready to be slathered on. She looks up at him, a smile playing at the corner of her mouth while she arches a curious eyebrow at him.

“Just grabbing some snacks and stuff for me and El,” Mike says, half-mumbling, on his way to the refrigerator.

There’s a beat, a heavy silence that lasts an unbearable number of milliseconds, before his mom speaks. “Well, she’s awfully pretty,” Karen says, tone wry and heavy with suggestion.

Mike’s shoulders slump as he reaches into the fridge for a couple of cans of soda. “Ugh, Mom, please don’t.”

But, Karen continues on like Mike hadn’t even spoken. “And so nice. I can see why you like her. Maggie Sinclair was telling me that Homecoming’s coming up in a few weeks. You going to ask El to go with you?”

Mike huffs out a sigh, stomach turning sour. “No,” he all but spits out. Right, like there’s a universe where El would ever want to go to Homecoming with him. She may find him cute and like flirting with him, but a girl like her doesn’t go out on a date with a guy like him unless she has some horrible ulterior motive. No, Mike’s not keen on testing those waters.

“Well, why not? I think she likes you, too.”

At that, Mike pauses as he rifles through the pantry. “How? You only talked to her for, like, a minute,” Mike says and, god, he can hear just how surly he’s being right now.

“A mother’s intuition,” Karen says, prim and all-knowing. “I’m right, you’ll see.”

As much as Mike wants to believe his mom, he doesn’t – can’t, in fact. So, he just makes a noise of acknowledgment of what his mom said – not agreeing, just acknowledging – before he grabs a bag of chips from the pantry, grateful that there’s enough in there for them to share. “Gotta go get to work,” he says before he rushes out of the kitchen, away from the very, very uncomfortable conversation, and….

Back to El.

He’s halfway down the stairs into the basement, sodas and chips cradled in his arms, when he spots where El decided to settle down at. And, when he does, he almost trips the rest of the way down the steps.

El’s on the couch – her backpack on the floor by her seat, US History book camped out on the surface of the coffee table, ready to be used. There’s a notebook on her lap that she’s looking down at, reading whatever is written on the pages as she lightly chews on the corner of her thumbnail. Her
legs are pulled up, folded casually in front of her, the flowy fabric of her skirt keeping everything appropriately covered. It’s only as he stares at her folded legs does he realize that he can see her bare toes peeking out from beneath her knees and the sight of it is so adorable, Mike nearly has a coronary.

El’s taken her shoes off and made herself right at home, it seems, pressed up as she is into the corner of the couch where the back meets the arm, her legs comfortably arranged in front of her. Moreover, she somehow manages to look like she fits right in, like she’s always been there or something, like there’s nowhere else in the universe El should be other than on his couch in the basement, and Mike can’t help the little wobble his heart gives at that thought.

But he has to get his act together as El looks up at the sound of his footsteps and gives him what can only be described as a beaming smile. “Ooh, BBQ chips! I love those,” she says, clearly recognizing the bag Mike’s holding in one hand. “Good choice. See, I knew I was right to trust you.”

Mike finds himself smiling back and there’s nothing he can do to stop it even if he wanted to, which he doesn’t. “Glad to be able to prove myself,” he says as he comes around the table and plops down on the other end of the couch, one leg folding up with the other pushed against the floor so he can turn to face her. “Here, snacks and drinks, like promised.”

El takes one of the cans of soda as Mike grabs his own backpack and opens it up to take out his history notebook. “Such a gentleman you are.”

Mike arches an eyebrow, nervousness almost completely forgotten as he feels himself falling into their normal back and forth, as easy as an old habit. “You know, that’s the second time you’ve called me a gentleman,” he says, the beginning of a grin on his lips.

“And, each time, it was true,” El says with a smile that is too coy for its own good. “You need to learn to take a compliment.” El winks at him, then, full of flirty teasing that does things to his insides, things that are wholly inappropriate when the cause of those things is sitting less than two feet away, and he looks away, unable to keep looking at her in this moment without feeling like he might go blind.

Oh, Mike knows how to take a compliment. But, only when he feels like he’s earned it. And, contrary to El’s insistence, he’s certainly no gentleman. Not with the way his gaze sometimes (ok, a lot of the time) lingers on her hips when she walks, not with the way he wakes up in the middle of the night having dreamt about her… not with the way he fantasizes about her behind the safety of his locked bedroom door.

No, when it comes to El Hopper, Mike Wheeler is no gentleman.

But, sometimes, she makes him want to be.

A blush rises to his cheeks, unbidden, at the warring emotions roiling beneath the surface – shame, pride, surprise, joy – and he lets out a huffed laugh, not quite a giggle (because that would be really embarrassing), before looking back at her, knowing the expression on his face is one of a besotted fool and suddenly having a hard time caring about it.

Especially not when El’s looking at him with something that sparks against the warm embers of hope in his heart.

“Well, we should probably get to work,” he says, almost reluctantly, and he knows it’s coming across in his voice.
“Yeah,” El agrees, sounding as enthused with the idea as he is. “It is what I’m here for, so….” She gives him a cheeky grin. “Want to hear what ideas I’ve come up with for our History project so far?”

It’s the easiest thing in the world to settle into a working rhythm with Mike. Like, so easy, it’s almost scary.

True to her words, they start out going over the ideas El’s come up with for what to do for their US History project, both of them leaning over her notebook that she’s set on the coffee table in front of them, the assignment sheet hovering nearby for reference. There’s been a part of El’s brain that’s been thinking non-stop about what to do for their project and the results of it are the full page of word vomit in the form of a bulleted list written in her cramped handwriting.

Some of the ideas are dismissed by both of them out of hand – essays for each pertinent topic are so boring and fake interviews with historic figures is just cringe. But, together, Mike and El settle on an idea: an epistolary report – fake letters, newspaper articles, etc – illustrated with photos, all telling the story of America’s history. They decide that Mike will focus on some of the more creative aspects of the writing while El will focus on staging and taking the pictures, but there’ll be plenty of report writing for both of them over the next coming months.

They spend about 20 minutes outlining what they want to do for the topics they’ve already covered in class, decide that they should probably meet up during the weekend for some extended work on the project (and, boy, is she beyond excited with the prospect of spending what sounds like will be all of saturday with mike). With that taken care of, they then decide that since there’s still time before dinner, there’s no time like the present to get started on their Trig homework.

They work in mostly companionable silence for a little while, asking each other a question about a problem here or there, or just making some remark about what issue they’re working through. And it’s nice – more than nice, really. As much as Mike makes El feel all fluttery inside, being next to him is just… kinda calming. He both lights her up and settles her down at the same time and El has absolutely no idea what to make of that. All she knows is that it’s addicting and she wants more.

And, then, Mike does something that really, truly surprises her.

“You’re, like, really smart, aren’t you?”

Mike’s words pull El out of the math-induced reverie she’s in and she blinks rapidly a few times to clear the cobwebs as she looks up. “What?”

The way Mike’s looking at her sends a shiver down El’s spine, like he can’t believe she’s real, or something. His eyes are a little wide, mouth agape just so, and the hushed tone to his voice is everything. “Like, we’ve been sitting here working on these problems for about half an hour and I’m the one who keeps asking you for help, not the other way around, and I just….” Whatever Mike was going to say disappears into the ether as he looks at her, still awed, right hand lazily fidgeting with his pencil held loosely in his grip.

El blushes, face feeling hot and scarlet, and she looks down at the lined paper she’s doing her homework on. For a moment, she can’t catch her breath. Mike’s one of the smartest guys she knows – one of the smartest guys she’s ever met, really – and if he thinks she’s smart, then….

The thought trails off, her shocked brain having nothing to fill it with, and she looks back up at him,
feeling both proud and shy at the same time. “I’m not that smart. Like, not really,” she rushes out before drawing in a deep, almost gasping breath. “It’s just that math comes, like, really easy to me, you know? There are rules and only one right answer – no room for interpretation.”

Mike’s lips twist in a gentle, wry grin. “It’s not just math, though. You’re just as good in History and Chemistry.”

El shakes her head. “That’s just because I work hard at those. Like, if I were really smart, I’d be better at English. I just…” El trails off, breath leaving her in a heavy sigh that puffs out her cheeks. “Literary analysis is the stuff of my nightmares.” She shrugs – she’s had years to get over this shortcoming of her academic performance.

Uncertainty flashes across Mike’s face – lips pinched, brow furrowed – but it’s quickly replaced with shy resolve. It’s one of El’s favorite of Mike’s expressions and the sight of it makes her feel all bubbly inside. “I could help you in English, if you want.” Mike shrugs, trying to pass off as casual, but the nervous hope on his face gives him away. “I’m good at deciphering narrative analysis and symbolism.” He fidgets in place, glancing away as El continues to stare at him, eyes wide as she starts to take in what he’s offering. “But, only if you want, though,” Mike hurries to say. “I’m sure you’re, like, totally fine in your English class, but I can help if you wanted.” Mike stops talking, lips pressed in a thin line like he’s trying to contain himself, like there’s a stream of words waiting to explode forth and his closed mouth is the only thing holding them back.

El’s so touched, she almost doesn’t know what to do. Mike offering to help her, the shy way in which he went about doing it, the idea that he’s voluntarily signing up to spend more time with her… all of it leaves her almost breathless. As the weight of the realization fully sinks in, El finds herself smiling, lips curling up in both surprise and humor. “Well, that depends,” El says, aware that her voice has taken on a flirty edge and not caring about it one little bit.

Mike arches an eyebrow, curiosity and wariness battling it out on his face. “Depends on what?”

“Oh, that’s not what I – I mean, I just – you don’t – I would never–”

This time, El truly can’t hold back her laughter and it explodes from her in bright giggles, leaving her feeling lighter than air. She reaches out to lay a hand on Mike’s forearm, her touch light and barely there, just enough to cut him off before he can really get going. “Mike, I’m just having fun – sorry, I know I can lay it on a little thick sometimes.” Somehow, the flush on his face only deepens and he looks down, like he’s ashamed, and guilt settles uneasily in her stomach. So, El curls her fingers around his forearm, feeling the heat of him through the thin layer of his sweater, and gives him a comforting squeeze. She waits for him to look back up at her, eyes wide and hopeful, before she speaks. “Thank you, for offering to help,” she says softly, sincerely. “If I need help of any kind, you will definitely be the first person I call. After all, you gave me your phone number.”

A soft smile graces Mike’s lips and he rolls his eyes. “I feel like I should be regretting giving it to you.”

“Hey, no takes-backsies,” El says, grinning. She pulls her hand away, immediately missing the warmth of his arm beneath her touch, and points her index finger at him. “You’re gonna have to change your phone number entirely if you wanna get rid of me.”
“Somehow, I think you’ll find a way to get a hold of my phone number if I do that just to show me up,” Mike says, tone wry even though he looks amused. “You’re that kind of troll.”

El giggles, hands pressing over her heart. “Oh, bless you, you’re starting to understand me,” she says with an over-dramatic sigh.

“You are, without a doubt, the strangest girl I’ve ever met,” Mike says, sounding both baffled and amused at the same time.

“You know, I’m going to take that as a compliment,” El says, looking at him with one eyebrow arched, a hint of a smirk on her lips.

“You would, wouldn’t you?” Mike says and El can hear the laughter he’s barely suppressing in his voice.

There’s a flirty, witty reply building on the tip of her tongue – something along the lines of “I’ll take anything you give me as a compliment” – but before she can speak it aloud, Karen Wheeler’s voice crashes down into the basement, announcing that it’s time for dinner.

Mike gives her a look, eyes full of embarrassed warning. “I hope you’re ready,” he says, almost dour.

El’s brow raises towards her hairline. “Wow, you make it sound like I’m heading up to my execution, or something.”

Mike raises one shoulder in a helpless shrug. “Feels like that some nights, to be honest,” he says as they both stand up and head upstairs.

El frowns at Mike’s back as she follows him up the stairs, concern filling her at what he just said (and, yes, despite her concern, she is also shamelessly checking out the lines of his shoulders and back as she trails behind him – she’s attracted to him, she can multi-task). She wonders, in this moment, what Mike’s home life is really like.

El’s been around the block a bit, seen what life can really be like – she is, after all, from New York and has seen A Lot Of Shit – and she’s reasonably sure that Mike isn’t being physically abused, or anything. He doesn’t carry himself like it, mainly. But she wonders how supportive his parents are, how engaged they are.

*Not all families interact the same,* she reminds herself. Just because her and Hop have a super close relationship, doesn’t mean that it’s wrong that other kids don’t with their parents.

But, still, something about Mike’s attitude towards having dinner with his family is off-putting and El wants to know why.

But there’s no time really to keep wondering about it as Mike leads her through the first floor and into the dining room.

Karen Wheeler is simultaneously sitting in her seat while setting down a large casserole dish filled to the brim with lasagna. At the head of the table is a tall, salt-and-pepper haired man with thick glasses who El can only assume is Mike’s dad. And, finally, sitting next to Karen, blonde hair bobbing as she fidgets – likely from kicking her feet back and forth under the table – is Mike’s little sister. El doesn’t know her name because Mike never said it, but this is her first time seeing the younger girl’s face and she’s just adorable with her hair in a French braid and her bright blue eyes. Honestly, El almost coos, Mike’s little sister is that cute.
Karen spots both Mike and El entering the dining room and, with a broad smile on her face, makes the point of introducing El to her husband and her daughter Holly since, quote, “if I let my son do it, he’d finally introduce you by the time Holly’s out of college,” which earns her an exasperated groan from Mike as he sits down across from his dad at the other head of the table, leaving El to sit across from Holly at the only other place setting.

El barely manages to bite back her smile at just how done Mike sounds and looks over at Mr. Wheeler first. “It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Wheeler.” Mike’s dad doesn’t say much; instead, he just stares back at her in a way that is almost unnerving, one hand raised in a lazy wave. Ignoring it as best she can, El lets her gaze flick over to the young girl sitting across from her. “And you, too, Holly.” El finally looks at Karen. “Thank you again for inviting me to dinner. This looks amazing,” El says, gesturing at the lasagna, salad, and platter of garlic bread in the center of the table.

“With compliments like that, you’re welcome here any time,” Karen says, laughing a little. El likes her, she realizes as everyone starts serving themselves, speaking only to ask for someone to pass something. Karen Wheeler is warm, open, and exactly the kind of mother El would expect living an idyllic, suburban lifestyle. It makes her long for her own mom, who she hasn’t seen in years, as she remembers experiencing that same motherly warmth when she came home from school to be greeted with hugs and kisses, or when she needed to be held after a nightmare. God, sometimes, she misses her mom so much, it aches.

“So, El,” Karen says after everyone’s had a couple of bites off their plates. “How are you liking Hawkins so far.”

El gives Karen a smile as she finishes chewing and swallowing a mouthful of food. “It’s great! It’s such a cute little town. And everyone’s so nice.” From next to her, El heard Mike let out a disbelieving snort, but she’s the only one who hears it. Still, she glances over at him and raises a curious eyebrow when she catches his gaze. Realizing El heard him, Mike rushes to look down at his plate, cheeks suffusing with pink.

“And is you dad settling back in ok? He did tell you he grew up here, didn’t he?”

El focuses back over at Karen. “Honestly, he’s loving being back in Hawkins – much more his speed these days than the streets of New York.” El pauses, letting out a giggle as a memory comes to mind. “He’s been having a great time pointing out everything that’s changed since he moved, so I guess it’s both old and new for him.”

“Oh, well that’s wonderful,” Karen says. She teaches for her wine glass, slim fingers cradling the bowl just above the stem. “Tell your father we say hello, would you? And maybe extend an invite for him to join us for dinner with you.” She grins, before adding as an aside, “Ted and I knew your father, back in the day, when we were in high school.”

“I’ll definitely do that Mrs. Wheeler, thanks,” El says with a smile.

Karen graces El with a smile that makes her stomach feel a little wobbly (longing, that’s what that’s called) before she looks over at her husband, brows perched expectantly. “You remember Jim, don’t you Ted?”

Mr. Wheeler mumbles an affirmative around a mouthful of food, but doesn’t make much noise otherwise, and the scoff that comes from Mike, full of completely unsurprised disappointment, is audible enough to be heard all the way across the table.

Karen’s smile turns a little brittle as she seems to try to ignore Mike’s surly behavior and El can feel the cracks creeping around the edges of the facade. Maybe Mike’s warning in the basement really
wasn’t for nothing, after all.

Still, Karen seems determined to have a Family Dinner – capital F, capital D – and throws herself into cajoling conversation from her children and husband. El watches it from the sidelines, feeling like an anthropologist or something, and she’d be more amused if it wasn’t so awkward.

Getting details from Mike about his day is like pulling teeth, while it’s the opposite from Holly, who launches into great detail about what apparently are the soap-opera-esque dramas of Holly’s 1st grade class at Hawkins Elementary. It’s like Holly doesn’t even breathe as she monologues, Karen rapt with attention. Mike’s not immune either, cracking a smile every so often at some of the highlights of Holly’s day and/or at the way the little girl is delivering her updates, like there’s nothing more important in the entire universe than who’s “super special best friends” with who on this run-of-the-mill day at school.

El has to admit, Holly is absolutely adorable, all cherubic smiles and bright, sparkling eyes – just completely and totally enchanting. Yes, El’s enchanted; part of her just wants to scoop Holly up and smuggle her home in her pocket or something.

Which is why she’s completely and totally caught off guard when Holly reveals herself to be a troll of the highest order.

Mike’s parents are talking – something about whatever goes on at the office Mr. Wheeler works at – leaving the kids to amuse themselves. Parents sufficiently distracted, Holly waits no time at all in looking straight across at El, meeting her eyes for probably the first time that evening, and asks, “Do you wanna be Mikey’s girlfriend?” Straight to the point, direct, take-no-prisoners.

El has never seen anyone blush faster and hotter than Mike does right this moment, his face turning an alarming shade of pink as he narrows his eyes at his sister, panicked shame written across every inch of his expression. “Holly!” Mike hisses his sister’s name, low enough not to catch the attention of his parents, but with enough volume to get across just how embarrassed he is. God, he looks like he wants to sink down to the floor so it can swallow him whole.

El’s heart does a strange pitter-patter at Mike’s reaction – if he’s this worked up about it, there must be something to Holly’s question, right? Her gut’s screaming at her to answer a resounding “yes!” to Holly’s question. Because it’s something she desperately wants. The more she gets to know Mike, the more she wants to be his girlfriend. She wants to go out on dates with him and hold his hand as they walk through the hallways at school and kiss him goodbye as they separate for the classes they don’t have together. She wants to just be with him, all the time. The strange combination of excitement and peace she feels in Mike’s presence is addicting and she never wants to give it up.

But she also knows that Mike, for whatever reason, is skittish. There’s always a little bit of a hesitancy there when he flirts with her, a distance that glazes over his eyes whenever she compliments him or hints that she’d like to be more than friends. She’s not going to put him on the spot, right here at his dinner table, by telling Holly that, yes, she very much wants to be Mike’s girlfriend.

So, El decides to deflect. She leans back in her seat, fork set daintily by her plate, and gives Holly a secretive smile. “Do you want me to be Mike’s girlfriend?” She can hear the choking noise that escapes Mike from the question and she wants to look over to make sure Mike isn’t hyperventilating, but she doesn’t dare risk breaking eye contact with the little girl sitting across from her as she reaches for her water glass, bringing up to her lips for a sip.

Holly stares back, clearly neither of them willing to look away as they measure each other up. El knows she has about 10 years on the younger girl, so she’s not going to be the one to look away first.
Is she trying to intimidate a little girl? Yep. Does she feel bad about it? Not particularly.

After a half a second that lasts an eternity, Holly looks away, lips pursed in a heart-tugging pout. El finishes bringing the glass to her lips, secure in her victory.

“No, you’re too pretty to be Mike’s girlfriend.”

Holly’s words hit El like a punch to the solar plexus and she inhales her water instead of swallowing it. The shock of it sets her coughing, splashing water back into her face as she hurries to pull away the glass. El hurries to set down the glass as she fumbles for her napkin, still coughing up a storm.

This is, of course, when Karen fully tunes back in to what’s going on at the other end of the table and El can’t imagine how this strange tableau must look: El hacking up a lung into her napkin as she tries to dry off her face, Mike trying to hide behind his hands like he’s hoping his palms will suffocate him, and Holly looking victoriously smug.

Karen must have heard enough to know that Holly is the cause of whatever is going on because El sees her narrow her gaze at her youngest child. “Holly Wheeler, we do not talk to our guests like that! Do you understand me, young lady?”

Holly sinks into her seat, lower lip wobbling dangerously. “Yes, Momma,” she says, all piteous and whining – she seems to know she’s been caught and that there’s no squirming her way out of this one.

“I want you to apologize to El, right this instance,” Karen says before she trains her gaze on El. “I am so sorry for my daughter’s behavior.”

(El hears the muttered, “Oh god, just shoot me,” from where Mike’s sitting and she kinda has to admit that she can understand where he’s coming from.)

El, still dabbing at her face (and her upper chest where droplets of water landed – damn, she really made a mess of herself, didn’t she?), smiles across at Karen. “Please don’t worry about it, Mrs. Wheeler – we were just talking and the water went down the wrong way.”

But Karen won’t budge. “I appreciate that, but my daughter needs to learn how we treat guests in this house.” She looks over at her daughter, one eyebrow arched pointedly. El can’t help but notice that Mr. Wheeler has completely checked out, steadily making his way through his dinner like nothing is happening and all El can wonder is what in the fuck is wrong with Mike’s dad.

“I’m sorry, El,” Holly says under the weight of her mother’s expectant gaze.

El smiles, though it’s small, as a wave of sympathy rolls through her. “Apology accepted, Holly.”

The rest of dinner is subdued, pretty much no conversation as they finish up. El notices that her and Mike are kind of rushing through what’s left on their plates – Mike to escape the awkwardness of the situation and El not wanting to make him wait for her to finish. Because she knows he’ll wait at the table until she’s done, even though every inch of him looks ready to bolt at the drop of a hat.

Once El and Mike have finished and taken their dishes to the kitchen, Karen waves them off, not even asking them to help clear the table. And it’s only once she and Mike have trudged back down to the basement does Mike let out the full-throated groan that he’s obviously been holding back all throughout dinner. El watches as he goes over to the couch and practically throws himself down onto the cushions, one arm coming up to drape over his eyes like if he can’t see the world, he can pretend that nothing bad has ever happened to him. “Oh my god, I am so sorry you had to go through that,” Mike all but whines as El makes her way around the coffee table. She sits down gently next to him,
his hip only a few inches away from her own, and if Mike notices how close she is, he doesn’t show
it. “First my dad with the – and then my mom, ugh how embarrassing – and then Holly! I just –”

“Hey, stop,” El says, hand coming out to land on Mike’s leg, right above his knee. Sure, it might not
be the most appropriate place to be touching him – definitely on the “too intimate” side of the line for
sure – but she doesn’t regret it. Not when it helps jolt Mike out of the spiral of shame he’s falling
into. The arm drops from his face and he’s looking at her, wide-eyed and flushed, almost a little bit
frozen. El smiles at him, hoping she’s being reassuring. “All families are weird, ok? Trust me, I don’t
think any less of you because of them.”

Mike’s brow furrows, like he can’t understand what she’s saying to him. “You… don’t?”

El lets out a soft giggle. “Nope, I don’t. You can’t control your family, after all. Besides,” she says,
pausing to wink at him. “There’s not much you could do to make me think less of you.”

El is starting to think that red might be Mike’s new permanent color as he blushing again and the sight
of it is just so goddamn cute, El wants to keep doing things to make him blush just like he is right
now. “Oh, um, good, that’s good,” Mike manages to get out. He sits up out of his slump, almost
hunched over as he looks at their school things still scattered across the coffee table. “Well, um, we could get back to doing our homework, I guess, unless you wanted me to take you home.” A
grin, small and wry, crosses his face and it’s a beautiful sight, especially compared to how down he
was just moments ago. “I wouldn’t blame you after what happened up there,” he says, gaze flicking
up towards the ceiling.

El returns Mike’s grin. “Well, we’re most of the way through our Trig homework, so we should at
least finish that. Then, since we’re in the same class, I was thinking maybe we could work on our
Chem homework and then you could take me home, if that’s ok with you.”

The look that alights in Mike’s gaze is both pleased and surprised and he sits up straighter, nodding
vigorously. “Yeah, sure that sounds good. We can definitely do that.”

El giggles – Mike’s enthusiasm is infectious and El feels it warming her from the inside out. “Good,
I’m glad you agree,” she says. Without thinking, her hand still on Mike’s leg, she punctuates her
point by giving him a squeeze, her fingers curling into his flesh through the thick denim of his jeans.
Her heart flutters at the feel of lean, firm muscle beneath her touch and, oh, she just wants to keep
touching him and never stop.

But, reality butts its way in as Mike jumps, his gaze flicking down to where El’s hand is resting just
above his knee, eyes wide and confused. “Um….”

It fully hits her a half a second later that this is really actually happening, that she’s practically feeling
him up, and she wrenches her hand away like she’s burned herself, shame and guilt making for
strange bedfellows inside her veins. “Oh god, I’m – I’m so sorry. I just – I wasn’t –”

It’s Mike’s turn to interrupt her this time as he holds up a hand, palm facing out, the grin on his face
making him look boyish in the best possible way, shy and sweet. “Don’t be sorry,” he says, voice
maybe a little raspier than it was a few moments ago. He shrugs, trying to downplay whatever
emotions he’s feeling beneath the surface, but it doesn’t put a dent in his grin. “It was nice,
comforting.” Another shrug. “I liked it.” Mike pushes those words past his lips like a confession he
wasn’t sure if he had the bravery to commit to, but El feels her heart surging inside her chest anyway.

Hope springs eternal inside her veins with the power of a swarm of butterflies, leaving her feeling
light and tingly, and she smiles. “Well, good,” she says. “Shall we get back to work?”
“Sounds like a plan.”

The rest of their homework goes by pretty quickly, their working routine re-establishing itself without a hitch. It only takes them another hour and a half to breeze through the remaining problems for Trig and the Chemistry worksheet they were assigned. It’s nice, really nice – Mike’s smart, able to work through the problems quickly, and by the time they get to their Chemistry homework, El feels herself having to work to keep up with him. Luckily, they work really well together, turning the whole exercise from a solo one into a collaborative one, chatting almost the entire time as they work through their assignment together.

It’s so nice that, by the time they’re finished with their Chemistry assignment, El’s already missing it. She barely manages not to pout, though, not wanting to have to explain the overwhelming feelings going on inside of her.

Mike stands up from the couch as El starts gathering her things. “I’m just going to use the bathroom while you pack up. Be out in a sec,” he says, giving her a smile before he heads for the small half-bathroom in the basement he pointed out to her earlier.

El nods and watches him go, letting her shoulders slump once the door is closed. Man, she doesn’t want to go home. She just wants to hang out with Mike, getting to know him now that the bulk of their homework is done. It’s honestly not fair that she has to go home and be ok with this, it’s really not.

El’s just finishing zipping up her backpack, sighing the entire time, by the time Mike emerges from the bathroom, rubbing his palms awkwardly on his jeans. “You ready to go?” he asks as he scoops his keys up from off the coffee table.

El stands, nodding, and paints on her bravest smile. “Yep, ready.”

The drive home is nice, but El’s filled with the most poignant bittersweet feeling she’s ever experience in her entire life. And she has a feeling Mike might be experiencing the same as well. El’s pretty sure there’s a straight-shot path from Mike’s house to hers, but she watches as he navigates them through downtown, going the speed limit the entire time, like he’s trying to draw this moment out and make it last as long as possible.

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“Thanks for letting me hang out at your house and work on our homework together,” El says as Mike drives them down Main Street. The sun’s about a half-hour past setting, casting twilight across the storefronts, making everything feel like it’s shrouded in sleepy mystery. El loves it.

Mike glances at her for half a second before returning his eyes to the road, but El can see the ghost of a smile on his face. “Thanks for not being horribly repulsed by my family.”

El rolls her eyes and reaches across the center console to give Mike a light slap on his shoulder with the back of her hand. Mike leans away from her, as recoiling in pain, but his huffed laughter tells a different story. “No, seriously, it’s nice having someone to hang out with while working on my homework.” El shrugs, fingers interlacing so she can pick at the edges of her fingernails with her thumbs. “I still don’t have many friends in my actual classes and, I don’t know, I miss having people I can be with who I can share this with.” She looks up at him through her lashes, a grin pulling up one corner of her lips. “Besides, we make a pretty good team.”

That earns her another huffed laugh, which is quickly becoming one of her favorite sounds in the world. “Well, I’ll be your homework buddy whenever you want,” Mike says, grin more pronounced now.
“You have to be, you idiot,” El says through a giggle. “We’re partners, remember?”

Mike’s grin is a full on smile now. “How could I forget?”

El laughs as she shakes her head, amused beyond words, but a gasp escapes her as she remembers something. “Oh, that reminds me, I have a couple ideas for our working session on Saturday….”

The rest of the drive, all 5 minutes of it, are spent talking about their US History project and, well before El’s ready, Mike’s pulling the car into the driveway of her house. He puts the car into park and let’s his hands land onto the tops of his thighs. “I guess this is your stop,” Mike says as he looks over at her.

“Guess it is,” El says. She turns so she can face Mike, all her attention focused on him like it’s the easiest thing in the world to do. “Honestly, thanks for everything. Tonight has been great. We should make it a regular thing, yeah?”

Mike smiles and her heart nearly explodes. “Well, we do work well together, after all.”

“That we do,” El says. She looks across the cab, where Mike’s still smiling at her, and the urge to lean over and kiss him is strong, almost overpowering. “Thanks for the ride home,” she says, her voice going soft. And, before she can talk herself out of it, El leans over the center console. She balances herself with one hand on Mike’s forearm, the other grabbing onto him with fingers wrapping around the firm curve of his shoulder. She feels him go rigid at both her proximity and her touch, but El’s committed to this now and she leans in the rest of the way, savoring the moment as her lips graze lightly against the curve of his cheek.

It’s a quick kiss, sweet and grateful, and El’s heart goes into overdrive as she both feels and hears Mike’s sudden intake of breath, his gasp only audible because of her closeness. His skin is soft beneath her lips, soft and warm and El lets herself linger maybe a half a second longer than she should. She breathes him in, letting her lungs fill with the smell of his shampoo and laundry detergent and, beneath it, the smell of clean boy, indescribable and addicting, and he’s warm, so warm, she’s pressed against him. El never wants to pull away.

But she does so, reluctantly, her lips tingling from the feel of Mike’s skin against them, and she smiles, struck by the look on his face, full of breathless awe that makes hope swell in her heart, setting a fire smoldering in her veins. Her face feels warm in the best way possible and El never wants this feeling to fade. “Good night, Mike,” she says, words barely above a whisper, not wanting to ruin this moment.

Mike stares at her, rendered mute by something as little as a kiss on the cheek, jaw dropped and lips parted in shock. Feeling all fluttery, El looks away as she reaches for her backpack down by her feet. Once it’s in her lap, El reaches for the handle of the door, freezing mid-pull of the door handle when she hears Mike’s voice from behind her. “Good night, El.”

Smiling, El turns to look behind her, eyes on Mike the entire time as she opens the door. She gets out of the car and shivers a bit as the evening air hits her skin. She wishes she didn’t have to go, but she knows she can’t stay out here forever, knows if she even so much as looks back she’ll do something even sillier like kiss him full on the mouth and she knows Mike’s not ready for that. So, when she closes the door behind her, El doesn’t turn back, resists every urge to look back at the car.

But, she can feel Mike’s eyes on her as she heads inside, warm and thrilling, and, for the moment, it’s enough.
Mike can’t tear his eyes away from El as she walks towards her house, drinking in every detail as she ascends the stairs of her front porch. The skin of his cheek is still tingling from where El kissed him, and he swears, if he closes his eyes, he can still feel the softness of her lips, the warmth of her pressed against him with gentle curves and alluring sweetness.

El kissed him. She actually kissed him. Sure, it wasn’t on the lips, but still… it’s more than he ever could have hoped for.

Mike watches El until she disappears inside her house and, only then, once he's sure she's gone, does he put his car in reverse to start heading home, a dopey smile on his face the entire time.

God, he can’t wait until tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

....Yeah, I'm really putting the "slow" in "slow burn, aren't I.

(No, I'm not sorry. Yes, I'm enjoying this. Immensely.

Hopefully, once I settle down into a new routine, I'll be able to figure out how to increase my posting cadence. I'm getting all too frustrated with wanting to work on this fic but having NO TIME. But, I'm still gonna be here (because where else am I gonna be...?) and I'll catch y'all on the flip side!

(AND FUCK YEAH WE'RE DEF GETTING S4. LIKE WE BEEN KNEW, BUT IT'S NICE TO HAVE CONFIRMATION.)
and just when things are going so well....

Chapter Notes

What's this? Another chapter in less than 2 weeks? Quelle surprise!

(yeah, i don't know french, so don't @ me)

This is out a little sooner than I planned, partially because I think I'm getting back into a regular rhythm and because I came to a good break, even though I had more I wanted to write.

(Be glad for this, my original plan was to end on a cliffhanger and now y'all don't have to be tortured by it, so UR WELCOME.)

Also, haha, this chapter is entirely from Mike's POV and I'm not sure how that happened? So um...whoops (though somehow I'm sure you all will bear the disappointment JUST FINE.)

Anyway, enjoy! And let me know what you think!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

That dopey smile stays on Mike’s face the entire way home.

He takes his time weaving through the streets of Hawkins – much like he had on the outbound trip – trying to savor the quiet magic of the moment, trying to live in it forever. El’s presence has permeated every inch of the car but he knows, the moment he steps out, it’ll fade away, like gossamer smoke blowing away at the slightest puff of wind.

God, if he breathes deeply enough, he can smell the mild sweetness of El’s shampoo as she leaned in to kiss him on the cheek, never mind all the other phantom sensations still clinging to all his senses as he drives home.

Mike’s memory of the kiss is both blurred and crystal clear, like he’s stuck in some weird, hyper-focused time warp and, as he drives home, foot pressed on the accelerator just enough to keep him going 20mph – slow enough to give him time to savor it, while fast enough so that he doesn’t get pulled over for driving too slow – he lets himself live in that memory, looping it over and over again in his mind, experiencing it anew each time.

He can hear the sound of her shifting in the passenger seat as she leans over the center console, loud in the hushed atmosphere inside the car. He can feel her hands on his arm, one just below his elbow, the other high on his shoulder, her touch searing through the thin fabric of his sweater.

More importantly, he can still feel the exact moment where her lips touched his skin, can still feel the buzz along every nerve ending at the gentle pressure of her kiss. It’s like the sensations of El’s lips on his cheek have been seared into his skin and Mike thinks he’s always going to carry the physical echoes of her touch with him for the rest of his life.

(even worse, he knows how her lips feel now, soft and full and lush, and he can’t help but wonder
how they would feel pressed other places – his neck, his jaw, his own lips… he can picture it with the kind of clarity built by an overactive imagination – her lips trailing kisses up and down every inch of skin she can find – and it makes him shiver, makes him hope, and mike knows he’s never going to get over this.

Best of all (or is it worst of all?), Mike can still see the look on El’s face as she pulled away, her expression soft and beautiful and maybe a little shy with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, her face literally inches away from his as he stared at her, dumbfounded and frozen. She’d been close enough that it would have taken no effort on his part to lean in and kiss her, no effort at all to know what it would feel like to have her lips pressed against his. Only his shock and fear kept him in place, every fiber of his being yearning to carry out the desire that raged through him, hot and sudden as a roaring wildfire.

He doesn’t regret not doing it, doesn’t hate that he was frozen in place – he’s so not ready to make that kind of move, not sure if that kind of move is even welcome, not brave enough to find out for sure – but he still can’t turn off the way the rest of him desperately wants to know what it would feel like, even if just for a moment.

He’s only ever kissed one girl in his entire life at a party during their sophomore year that Dustin somehow managed to get an invite to. Mike had somehow found his way into being coerced to play Spin the Bottle; the girl, whose name he can’t remember (but he can remember that she was a year older than him), had been pretty tipsy. It wasn’t great, to be perfectly honesty – her lips were chapped, her breath stank of whatever sugary alcoholic punch concoction someone whipped up for the party, and it was all together pretty sloppy. Not really what a first kiss should be made of.

He hadn’t really been into it, all said and done, so it really didn’t hurt when the girl saw him in the hall at school a couple of days later, that her gaze slid past him like he was invisible. The only thing it really left him was the cynical twist of pride at being able to cross that particular milestone off his list.

Still, it’d be nice to kiss a girl and actually enjoy it, Mike thinks. And he’s absolutely positive he would really, really enjoy kissing El. God, just the thought of it is enough to give him full body shivers.

But, would she enjoy it?

The question, whispered in Mike’s usual mental tone of self-doubt, sobered him a bit, but doesn’t bring him down entirely, which is new – he’s just riding this high way too hard to be brought down all the way. He does wonder, though, if El actually wants to kiss him. She flirts with him like she might (scratch that – she flirts with him like she definitely wants to), but Mike knows there’s a big difference between thought and action.

Still, the thought that El might even be entertaining the idea of kissing him is the kind of fantastic he’s never going to get over. He just hopes he isn’t imagining any of this. Mike doesn’t know if he can be disappointed like this again.

But, for as sobering as that thought is, Mike’s still smiling as he pulls up in front of his house, his cheek still tingling with the ghost of El’s lips, and there’s a spring in his step that he thinks has never been there.

Mike somehow finishes his English and Spanish homework (a miracle considering how twitterpated he is right now), manages to avoid running into his parents, and crawls into bed a little before 11, still lovesick and high on Cloud 9.

It turns out, though, the one thing he can’t do is fall asleep. He’s just too keyed up, unable to stop
running that kiss in his mind over and over again, imagining it going differently, imagining that he actually summoned up the nerve to kiss her and then some. And when he does manage to fall asleep in the wee hours of the morning, he can’t stay asleep, his dreams filled with the sweet torture of El’s kisses and of the warm press of her body against his, dreams that leave him waking up frustrated, heart racing and feeling like his skin is two sizes too small.

By the time his alarm goes off and Mike crawls out of bed Wednesday morning, he officially feels like crap. At least physically. He still feels high off of El’s kiss and the way it mixes with the thready beat of his heart (a side-effect of too little sleep) makes him feel almost dizzy.

A glimpse in the bathroom mirror shows him he looks almost as bad as he feels and Mike groans at the sight of his pale, pasty skin and dark circles under his eye. Yeah, great, show up to school looking like a zombie. Real attractive, Wheeler.

God, El’s going to take one look at him and go running for this hills and this is going to ruin any chance he had with her and –

But she kissed you yesterday, don’t forget that.

The thought brings a wellspring of hope trickling through his veins and it’s enough to help him get over the paralyzing sight of his sleep-deprived face.

Feeling a little better than he did moments ago, Mike pushes through getting ready for school – showering, getting dressed, the whole bit. His mom gives him a frown when he comes down to the kitchen for breakfast and, from the way she’s staring at his face, he knows she’s noticed how tired he looks.

But she thankfully says nothing as Mike sits down to eat, which probably has a lot to do with the fact that, even though he’s exhausted, there’s a soft smile on his face that he can’t seem to get rid of. For the first time in almost as long as Mike can remember, he’s excited to be going to school – excited to see El.

(He tries not to think too hard about why he’s excited, afraid of getting stuck in his own swirling mess of self-doubt. But it’s almost impossible to ignore the flashing neon signs in the back of his head, the ones screaming at him that he wants to see how she’s going to act when she sees him, if she’ll act like she remembers that she kissed him, even if only on the cheek. He doesn’t know what he’ll do if she pretends like it never happened, so he decides to just ignore it entirely. Self-delusion always works out in the end, right?

Right?)

Just because he’s excited, though, doesn’t mean he’s not exhausted. It’s like everything around him is moving through a fog or he’s moving through a fog, a millisecond behind reality in a way that makes him feel even more off-kilter and awkward than he usually is.

He makes it to school, but it feels like just barely. On his way to Homeroom, Mike tries to catch a glimpse of El in the hall, but he can’t make her out among the teeming masses moving through the halls and he gives up a few feet from his destination, shoulders slumping as he walks into Homeroom. It’s hitting him now just how much he was practically relying on seeing El, even at a distance, before classes even start and it makes him want to pout as he realizes he’s not going to get to.

“God, you look like crap,” Lucas says a few minutes later as he slides into his usual seat next to Mike.
“How do you know?” Mike says into his arms, where he’s using them as a pillow for his head, hands trying their best to block out the light. “You can’t even see my face.” The words are muffled, but Mike knows he gets the point across as Lucas lets out a wry snort.

“Oh, yeah, because people who feel great always try to fall asleep face first on their desks.”

Mike huffs out a groan. “Ugh, fine, use logic.” He sits up and looks over at Lucas. “But enough about me. How’s it going?”

But Lucas is frowning at him, obviously still hung up on Mike’s condition. “Dude, did you pull an all-nighter, or something?”

A guilty thrill runs through him – man, he does not want to explain that he didn’t sleep because he couldn’t stop fantasizing about El – but Mike shoves it down and shrugs lazily in an attempt to downplay it. “No, just couldn’t sleep last night. You know how it goes.”

Lucas nods, lips pressed together in a sympathetic frown. “Yeah, insomnia’s a bitch,” he says, trying to keep his voice low so that their Homeroom teacher doesn’t hear him swearing. “Sucks, man. You gonna be ok today?”

“Kinda have to be, right?” Mike says, one side of his mouth pulled up in a humorless smirk.

“Let’s see if that optimism holds when we have that pop quiz in English.”

Mike lets out a long-suffering groan, head falling back in almost despair. “God, Lucas.” Every day for the last week, Lucas has been predicting they’re going to have a pop quiz in English… and every day he’s been wrong. And Mike is starting to get really tired of this prediction.

“I’m right today, you’ll see,” Lucas says, an insufferable smirk on his face. “I can feel it in my gut.”

“Probably just indigestion,” Mike mutters.

Only, today, it turns out not to be indigestion and Lucas’ smug face mocks Mike not an hour later as Mr. Marino passes out today’s pop quiz on the reading they had to do for “Catcher in the Rye” today.

But, other than the spike in his heart rate at the announcement of the pop quiz, Homeroom and English class pass by in an exhausted, dragging blur. Everything feels soupy, is the only word Mike can think of to describe it, each second feeling like it takes minutes to pass, making the wait to see El again feel like it’s taking a whole fucking year rather than two hours.

Mike stops in the bathroom on his way to Trig once he’s out to splash cold water on his face in a vain attempt to make himself look more awake (because feeling awake is just not in the cards today). It helps a little – the shock of the cold infusing some color back into his cheeks – but Mike’s not sure how long the effects are going to last for.

He beats El to Trig by about 20 seconds and is still settling down at his desk when she walks into the room. And, in that instant, everything else ceases to matter – not his exhaustion, his fear, his self-doubt – hell, even his excitement takes a backseat as he’s overwhelmed with the sheer awe that courses through him.

God, El is beautiful – she’s beautiful everyday, so this shouldn’t come as a surprise, but somehow it always takes his breath away. Today, she’s wearing a simple pair of jeans and burnt orange sweater, both items clinging to every intriguing dip and curve, and her hair’s done up in his favorite way with half of it pulled back in a ponytail, the other half left to cascade down her shoulders in lush waves.
And then she spots him, smiling at him as she approaches from the other side of the room and Mike’s heart just about stops. The look on her face is... god, so fucking beautiful, full of joy and light and knowing. It hits him, as sudden and powerful as a runaway train.

_Holy shit, she’s not pretending it didn’t happen._

No, she isn’t, not with the way her eyes are sparkling or the way her lips are pulled up in a smile that is rich with meaning, seeming to say _there’s something only you and i know_. A jolt hits him as Mike remembers that he knows what her lips feel like against his skin, knows how soft and warm they are. God, how he craves to feel them again, ideally against his own lips next time, but he knows he’ll settle for another kiss on the cheek.

_(mike almost snorts out loud at the thought. “settle.” like he’s compromising when, really, he should be lucky for any scrap of anything he gets from her.)_

“Well, crap. Turns out she noticed after all, despite the water he splashed on his face. “Oh, um, yeah,” Mike says, stuttering a bit. A flush rises to his cheeks and Mike wishes he wasn’t so easily and visibly embarrassed in front of El all the time. “I just... didn’t sleep well last night.”

The confusion fades away from El’s face, leaving only gentle concern remaining. “Oh, I’m sorry. That sucks. Bad dreams? That happens to me sometimes.”

A thought wanders through his head – why would El sometimes have nights filled with bad dreams? – but he doesn’t linger on it for long. “No, not bad dreams,” Mike says, heart rising into his throat as it occurs to him that the object of the not bad dreams is sitting right in front of him and his gaze drops to the surface of his desk. God, he started to answer and now he needs to keep clarifying, doesn’t he? So, Mike gulps and lifts his gaze, boldly meeting El’s eye with bravery he really doesn’t have. “The opposite, actually, about yesterday, what happened in the car.” He manages to hold El’s gaze, not just meet it, and tries to convey with a look everything he doesn’t have the courage to put into words, even though he still feels like he’s taking the world’s biggest leap of faith just with this simple, small act.

Which means he feels like he’s on top of the world as understanding dawns on El’s face, looking both surprised and pleased as her eyes widen and lips part just so, a gentle blush spreading across her cheeks. “ _Oh,_” she says, sounding almost a little shy. She glances away for just a split second, like it’s her turn to be nervous or something, but when she looks back, there’s already a smile growing on her face, making her look not just pleased but satisfied and Mike has literally never wanted to kiss someone more in his entire life than he does right now. “Good, that’s good,” El says. There’s a giggle building in her voice, making her words sound melodious and lilting, but she manages to mostly suppress it. “So, other than _that_, how’s everything else going?”

Mike shrugs, trying to come across as cool and nonchalant when, really, he’s anything but. “Had a pop quiz in English last period.”
A shudder runs through El, a little exaggerated in a way that pulls a quiet laugh out of him. “Yuck, no thanks,” she says, shaking her head like she’s trying to get rid of the horrific thought. “That sounds torturous.”

“Eh, it wasn’t so bad – it was pretty easy, actually,” Mike says, trying not too casual and flippant about it but, well, he is really good at his English class, if he’s being honest with himself (even though he hates “Catcher in the Rye” – seriously, Holden Caulfield needs to get over his childhood trauma and fast).

El perches an elbow on her desk, chin perched just so on the palm of her hand, and gives him an over-the-top simpering look. “Oh, Mike, you’re so smart.” She bats her eyelashes at him, all coquettish and cute and playful.

Mike rolls his eyes, blushing a little as he looks away. “Yeah, ok, laying on a little thick there, aren’t you?”

He looks back in time to see El reaching over, hand lightly smacking against his bicep. “Let me have my fun,” she says with eyes full of good-natured mischief and lips pulled up in a coy smile and, god, he’ll do anything she wants as long as she keeps looking at him like this.

“Somehow, I think you’ll have your fun no matter if I let you or not,” Mike says with his own smile, his more of a smirk than anything else.

El giggles and it’s the best sound in the world. “Aww, look, he can be taught.”

“Oh, shut up,” Mike says, though he’s still smiling and so is El and, god, this is so, so good, this easy and thrilling back and forth. He’s never felt like this with anyone in his entire life and he never wants to feel like this with anyone else, not when El’s perfect.

(is this how it feels, falling in love? the question’s not a conscious one, but somewhere deep in the back of his mind, buried beneath all the doubt and anxiety and everything, he’s starting to wonder as he feels the warmth of the emotion spread through him like honey, centered in his heart and radiating out until all he feels is the overwhelming sensation of drowning and flying at the same time and never, ever wanting it to stop.)

The bell signaling the start of 3rd period rings out a couple of minutes later, bringing the flirty conversation to a stop, and as Ms. Geno gets the day’s lecture started, Mike realizes something: sitting next to El has another benefit, it turns out. It makes him feel awake and energized, like he hadn’t spent all night tossing and turning.

He and El work together when Ms. Geno breaks to let the class tackle the practice problems, the two of them sliding easily into the working dynamic they discovered last night at his house, and that’s when Mike realizes something else.

El can’t seem to stop touching him.

Or, at least, it certainly seems that way to Mike.

It’s like what happened yesterday with that kiss on his cheek in the car and, even earlier, with her hand on his thigh as they sat on the couch in the basement –

(and if anyone expects him to forget about that, like ever – her touch warm and thrilling even through the denim of his jeans and, honestly, she can touch him whenever or wherever she wants if it’ll always feel like that – then, boy, do they have another thing coming.)
– has opened up the floodgates and now it’s like El’s always touching him.

Most of it is friendly and innocuous – a hand on his forearm to get his attention as they work together in their classes; a bump with her shoulder as they walk from US History to Chemistry, talking and laughing the whole way. But some of it feels… more than just friendly.

Like how she squeezes his upper arm as they say their goodbyes on Wednesday, her touch lingering just a little longer than for just between friends. Or how, when she joins the Party for lunch on Thursday, forcing the six of them to crowd around the tiny table, El spends the entire lunch period pressed against his right side, chairs pushed together so he can feel her from shoulder to thigh.

And, like he isn’t already overwhelmed enough by this, it’s a Pep Rally day, so El’s wearing her uniform, meaning that Mike is mostly pressed up against the bare skin of her arms and legs, her warmth bleeding easily through the fabric of his own clothing. He can feel the looks the two of them are getting – not just from the Party, but what feels like half the school because why is a cheerleader sitting with the nerd squad? – but it doesn’t seem to deter or bother El at all, or make her put anything even remotely related to space between him and her and it’s beyond nice in a way Mike never thought possible before now.

(and, none of this should go without mentioning the moment when Mike reaches down to absently scratch at his knee and his hand brushes along the skin of El’s thigh. They both jump at the contact and Mike is convinced that El’s going to push him away and accuse him of feeling her up. But she just gives him a small smile, coy and secretive, gaze just the right kind of dark and hooded, and then goes back to talking to Max like nothing has changed, like Mike’s whole world hasn’t been flipped upside down. Because he knows, now, that El’s skin is as soft as it looks, soft and silky smooth, and suddenly, all he wants to know is if the rest of her feels the same way.)

There’s a lot of Mike's still trying to figure out, filled questions he’s not anywhere near brave enough to ask, but the fact that El is so open and free and flirtatious in how she touches him is so far beyond encouraging, it might as well be in a different galaxy, to the point where he doesn’t even have to wonder why she’s doing this. Mike doesn’t know how he got lucky enough to catch the attention of the prettiest girl he’s ever met in his entire life and, honestly, he doesn’t want to look too closely at this for fear of somehow jinxing it. And though he’s not sure exactly how all this is going to shake out, he can’t help but think that maybe, just maybe, beyond all reasonable hope, that something is finally going his way.

And then, in the locker room after Cross Country practice on Thursday afternoon, a hand shoots out and slams his locker door shut while Mike’s getting dressed.

Mike jumps, startled, heart leaping into his throat as he takes half a step back, wearing only his boxers and shower sandals that squelch against the locker room floor at the motion. He brings his hands to his chest, fingers clutching the sweater he was about to put on, like the act of holding it close will shield him.

Eyes wide, Mike lets his gaze follow up the arm attached to the hand on his locker…

And comes face-to-face with Zach Mercer.

Zach’s a couple of inches shorter than Mike is, but probably has at least 20 pounds on him and knows it. He’s looking at Mike with a cold, sharp smile as he stands there in only a towel that’s wrapped tightly around his waist and, just a little further back, two members of his goon squad are flanking him like they’re acting as backup. If they’re trying to intimidate him, it’s totally working and Mike shrinks into himself, spine curving and shoulders slumping, even as confusion begins to ripple through him. What is going on?
“Well, well, well, if it isn’t Pencil Dick Wheeler,” Zach says as he drags his hand from Mike’s locker so he can loosely cross his arms over his bare chest.

“Um, hi?” Mike says, fighting the urge to shrink back even further, to turn tail and run despite how all of his stuff is still in his locker that Zach just rudely closed in front of him. He pointedly ignores the demeaning nickname as he tries to think of what could have caused him to land on Zach’s radar.

“A little bird told me something interesting yesterday,” Zach says as he leans against the lockers, looking cool and casual, but there’s a tight line beneath the words he’s saying and it makes the hairs on the back of Mike’s neck stand up. “Care to guess what they said?”

Mike’s tongue flashes out to lick his lips, a nervous gesture, and he shakes his head. “I honestly have no idea.”

It’s not what Zach is looking for, which is clear from the way he shakes his head, but he breathes out a laugh that trails into a weary sigh. “You’re ballsy for a nerd, I’ll give you that,” Zach says. “Don’t think that just because you’re on Varsity for Cross Country means you’re no longer a fucking nerd.”

At this point, Mike’s starting to get frustrated and it’s helping to chip away at some of his anxiety. “Never claimed I wasn’t a nerd,” Mike says, voice low. He’s not trying to antagonize Zach, he’s really not – but Mike’s never been anything other than painfully aware of his standing in the school’s social hierarchy, so the insinuation that he’s forgotten is a little insulting to his intelligence.

“Doesn’t explain why you and El Hopper were spotted leaving campus together on Tuesday, then, now does it?” The icy steel in Zach’s words is a painfully apparent now. “So, what’s going on there, Wheeler? You think you got a shot with someone like her? The two of you got something going on? She blowing you in the backseat of your car in exchange for doing her homework, or something? Because that’s about the only reason I can see for her getting in your car and driving away with you.”

Understanding hits Mike like a punch to the gut and he gulps. There’s a murderous glint in Zach’s gaze, now, his eyes hard and unyielding despite the smile on his face, and fear begins to spider-crawl through his veins despite the revulsion he feels at Zach’s insinuation, like El would do something like trade sexual favors as payment for Mike doing her homework, like El’s not smart enough to do her own work or something… like El’s only value is what she can offer with her body. “Um, no, nothing’s going on,” Mike says as he fights to keep his voice even, to keep the fear from quavering his words. “We were assigned to be partners for a class, so we went to work on our project. That’s all.”

Well, Mike hopes that’s not all, but he’s not about to say that Zach, a guy who could pound Mike into the floor if he really wanted to. The fact that Zach is also the guy who’s been very publicly pursuing El is most definitely a factor in Mike’s decision to play coy. He really doesn’t need to be murdered in the middle of the boy’s locker room because some meathead doesn’t understand that girls aren’t physical property.

Zach smiles, both cruel and relieved, and he pushes away from Mike’s locker. “That’s what I thought, Wheeler. Don’t know if you noticed, but I kinda have my eye on El. And she doesn’t need to have a skinny nerd like you sniffing around where you don’t belong.” He reaches out and puts a hand on Mike’s bare shoulder, fingers squeezing painfully into skin and bone, leaning in so his face is only a few inches from Mike’s, like he has a secret he wants to share or something. “Besides, you’re a smart guy – you know girls like El aren’t meant for guys like you.”

_He’s right, you know_, the voice in the back of his head whispers. _I’ve been telling you that for years._
Suddenly, Mike feels a little bit like he might be sick. It’s like Zach has reached in and grabbed the words that, for years, have rattled around in the back of his head, existing only as whispered thoughts that have gone unspoken, so he could shove them in Mike’s face. He feels like he’s been slapped, his fear given a voice.

The thing is, Mike logically knows it’s not true. There aren’t kinds of people meant for some people and not others – at least not in the way Zach is trying to get at. But that insidious seed of self-doubt, the source that makes Mike feel like he doesn’t deserve nice things, has just been given a voice and the weeds, dark and gnarly, begin to take over the dark corners of his brain, battling against the bright joy being around El the past few days has brought.

*It’s not true, it’s not,* Mike tries to tell himself, as firm as he possibly can. He reminds himself of all the ways El’s shown him this, of all the time she’s smiled at him and touched him and just been with him, open and joyful and without shame. He reminds himself that she’s flirted with him and kissed him on the cheek and looked at him with longing so blatant, even he can’t pretend like it’s anything else.

And yet….

Zach’s not done, however, and he continues to twist the knife deeper into Mike’s gut. “The only thing you’re good for to them is to do the things they don’t want to do so they can be with guys like me, guys who can take care of their needs.” He pauses, the cruel edge of his smile devastatingly cutting. “But, we both know you know all about that, don’t we, Wheeler?”

Zach’s words are knowing and Mike realizes he’d rather be pounded into the floor than have his shame rubbed in his face like this. Because Zach clearly remembers what happened with Mike and Ashley. And if Zach remembers, then so do other people, which means it’s only a matter of time before El finds out and realizes exactly how much she’ll have to lower her standards to be with him and –

A clap on his arm jolts Mike out of the downward spiral taking place inside his head and he refocuses on Zach, who’s looking at him with blue eyes filled with sick victory, proud knowing he’s put a nerd like Mike in his place. A flash of anger sparks inside of Mike, mostly drowned out by everything else, but undeniably there. It’s not fair that guys like Zach think they can get away with being assholes like this, that all they have to do is exert the right pressure and get their way every time. Mike also hates how he feels intimidated by this, but he’ll be damned if he shows any of this to Zach. No, he won’t give him the satisfaction.

“But, chin up, Wheeler. One day you’ll find a girl who’s just right for you, someone plain and dumpy and unpopular. And, in the meantime, if you’re lucky, maybe you can have my sloppy seconds. After all, gotta reward the guy who’s gonna keep my girl’s GPA up, now don’t I?” And, with one, final tight smile, Zach turns and saunters off, backup goons following close after, the sound of their echoing laughter trailing behind them as they disappear down another row of lockers.

Mike can’t help the sigh of relief as Zach disappears from view. His stomach churns with an almost revolting combination of emotions – anger, shame, fear, all crashing against the hope that’s been Mike’s new constant companion these past few days.

Shaking his head, trying to ignore the burn in his stomach, he resumes getting dressed, opening his locker door with hands that now won’t stop trembling. He can’t stop running Zach’s gross words over and over in his head, feeling sicker with each loop. He doesn’t want to believe that Zach’s words have any basis in reality – and he mostly doesn’t.

But years of self-doubt have made it a habit that’s hard to break and that stupid voice inside of him is
whispering all the things he can still so easily believe about himself: that he’s a loser, that girls like El never give guys like him the time of day, that he’s pathetic for even thinking that there’s a chance he could be with someone like El.

It’s a voice that’s impossible for Mike to turn off.

He ignores it the best he can, though, as he finishes getting dressed and gathers his things so he can head out of the locker room. God, he just wants to get home. Part of him wants to crawl into bed and mope for the rest of the evening, but he doesn’t want to give in, doesn’t want to let Zach win.

Mike knows that Zach is just trying to intimidate him, that he’s clearly threatened by whatever is developing between Mike and El and is hoping to scare Mike into backing off. And, realistically, Mike knows that if El really wants to be with him, she will be, no matter what Zach thinks about it or how much he tries to bully Mike.

But still….

Mike sighs as he pushes his way through the boys locker room and out into the hall. He pauses just outside the door, however, as he comes face-to-face with Lucas – well, after a fashion, that is.

Lucas is sitting on the floor across from the entrance to the boys’ locker room, backpack resting against his hip. His legs are folded in front of him, Trig textbook propped open on his lap with a pad of graph paper on one knee as he works through his homework. He looks up, though, at Mike’s arrival and it’s only when their eyes meet that Mike remembers.

Lucas’ dad needed to borrow his car (since his is in the shop), so Lucas asked Mike for a ride home from school today. Mike easily agreed because of course he did. But now he’s kind of wishing he didn’t (see the aforementioned desire to curl up in bed and mope) because he knows everything he’s feeling is written all over his face and he’s absolute shit at hiding his emotions.

Which means that Mike isn’t at all surprised when, maybe half a second later, Lucas’ expression morphs into one of confused concern. “Hey man, you ok?”

Mike groans as Lucas gets to his feet, schoolwork clutched awkwardly in his hurry to stand up. “Ugh, yeah, I’m ok, I guess. It’s just….” He trails off as he looks away, not sure if he wants to pour his heart out to Lucas, so to speak.

“Let me guess, it’s got something to do with your mad crush on El.”

Mike whips his head around to look at Lucas so fast, it almost makes him dizzy. “Wh-what? Why would you think that?” Holy shit, is Lucas a mind reader, now?

Lucas just smirks as they start walking out towards the parking lot. “Please. Don’t insult my intelligence. All your weird moods over the past couple of weeks can be traced straight back to the new girl.” Lucas shifts his books so they’re cradled in one arm as he snakes the other around Mike’s shoulder in casual companionship. “Now, tell the Love Guru all your troubles.”

Mike could lie his way out of this situation… but he’s as bad at lying as he is at hiding his emotions. Plus, friends don’t lie, so… “It’s stupid,” Mike mumbles, shrugging off Lucas’ arm from his shoulder. He notices Lucas doesn’t bother trying to put it back, like now that he knows Mike is
going to talk, Lucas doesn’t need to cajole him any further. “Zach Mercer was just talking shit to me about El back in the locker room,” he says after beat, breath leaving him in a weighty sigh.

“God, Zach Mercer is a walking stereotype of douchey fratbro,” Lucas says. “What’d he say? Whatever it was, I hope you treated his opinion like the trash I already know it is.”

Mike shrugs, one shoulder shifting beneath his backpack strap. “Just shit like how girls like El don’t go for guys like me, that there’s no way she’d ever be interested in being with a nerd, and that I should stay away because he’s more her type than I am. He also said a whole bunch of gross shit about El which made me want to punch him in the face, but that was the gist of it.” He sighs again, shaking his head. “I don’t know, like I know it’s stupid, but –”

“But, nothing,” Lucas says, cutting Mike off. “Zach Mercer is so full of shit.” He pauses, sighing. “Look, I know you haven’t had the best luck with girls – not to name any names, or anything. And I know girls in this town are usually so fucking hung up on being popular and shit. But, like, you’d have to be blind not to see how El looks at you.”

Hope beats wildly in his heart, thumping so hard Mike’s almost afraid it’s going to burst out of his chest. “Really?” he asks, the word strangled as he looks over at Lucas. He doesn’t meant to sound so desperate, but he’ll needs all the confirmation he can get that he’s not just seeing things when it comes to what’s happening between him and El.

“Uh, yeah,” Lucas says, one eyebrow arched like he can’t believe Mike is doubting himself. “Like, half the school has noticed it. Believe me when I say that if El wants to be with anyone at this school, it’s you. Don’t know why she’s lusting after your skinny ass, but there it is. Zach Mercer’s just jealous that El only has eyes for you. Don’t let his stupid intimidation tactics scare you or anything.”

Mike lets that sink in as they pass through the doors that lead out to the parking lot and he manages to give Lucas a small smile. “Thanks, man.” Lucas’ words have definitely helped muffle the self-doubting voice in the back of his head. Not enough to get rid of it entirely – Mike thinks there will never be any getting rid of it – but enough to help make it not so loud.

Lucas rolls his eyes. “Dude, no need to thank me. Though you could get off your ass and ask El out, or something. We’re only three weeks in to the school year and I’m already exhausted watching you two moon over each other. Just put me out of my misery and that’ll be payment enough for my amazingly awesome advice.”

“And you ruined it,” Mike says, smirking. “A perfectly heartfelt moment and you fucked it up. Way to not stick the landing.”

“Oh, fuck off, I totally stuck the landing.” Lucas says as they reach the car. “And I’m right and you know it.”

Mike unlocks the car and throws his backpack in the back seat. “Yeah, yeah, yeah.”

They don’t talk about El or Zach as Mike drives Lucas home. Instead they talk about anything but – their Chem lab report, what their plans are for the weekend, bitching about the wait for the latest Star Wars movie – and Mike feels so much better once he’s parked in front of his house. He and Lucas part ways with a clapped handshake that ends in a one-armed hug and Lucas crosses the cul-de-sac for his own house while Mike heads up the driveway towards his.

It’s like he can almost completely forget Zach cornering him in the locker room and threatening him into backing off from El as the evening goes on. He does his homework in the basement, eats dinner with his family, and lets the events after Cross Country practice fade into the rarely traveled corners
of his brain.

And, the entire time, he’s sending the occasional text message to El, usually prompted by one he’s received from her. And it helps, more than he can put into words, to remember that, yes, she likes him. However it all shakes out, El looks at him and sees someone worth investing her time and energy into. Take that, Zach, Mike crows with victory, wishing he could shove this in the other boy’s face.

Mike heads up to bed a little before 11, feeling a lot better than he did several hours ago. He almost immediately spots the book he’s borrowed from El once he closes the door behind him, the novel still sitting on his nightstand, bookmark slotted about three quarters of the way through the pages.

Mike lets himself smile as he goes over to the book, picking it up with a reverent touch. He cradles it in his hands, turning it over and over, like if he can absorb every detail about the book, it’ll bring him that much closer to El.

*Zach’s wrong about El, wrong about him, wrong about them.* El is smart and vivacious and sweet and, god help him, at least a little nerdy – she’s a million times better than Zach could ever dream of being and Mike’s almost positive El would want nothing to do with that meathead.

Letting out a content sigh, Mike sets down the book on his bed, intent on picking it back up and reading a little bit more of it once he’s under the covers. He reaches behind him and pulls off his shirt, standing so he can toss it in the overflowing hamper in the corner of his room –

– and catches sight of his reflection in the mirror, freezing at what he sees.

It’s not a surprise, the image he sees reflected back at him. He’s tall and lanky and pasty, almost a caricature of a male teenage nerd. His skin’s a couple of shades too pale to be truly attractive, the dark blue of his veins visible beneath his skin. And while being on the Cross Country and Swim teams have given him some muscle, it’s mostly of the lean variety and he can still see the outline of his ribs and collarbones all too easily, skin pulled taut over bone. He looks sun-deprived and just a little underfed – not the uber-attractive picture of health, not like a male model or anywhere close to that.

But that’s not what Mike’s focused on at the moment – and there have been many, many moments where he’s stood in front of this mirror, cataloging all his various imperfections.

No, what Mike’s zeroed in on is the dark spot right along his collarbone, a bruise in the shape of someone’s thumbprint. Twisting, gorge rising into his throat, Mike can see the accompanying fingerprint bruises along the high ridge of his shoulder, like a disgusting tattoo….

Right where Zach was gripping him earlier, the press of his hand heavy and threatening, leaving a mark that Mike now can’t look away from.

The bruises, now that he’s noticed them, throb slightly, a painful reminder of that moment in the locker room, when the optimistic hope he’s been luxuriating in the past few days was rudely tempered by the reality that people are watching him and El, watching and judging and disapproving. Worse, there’s part of him that’s still doubting that this could be real, that El really might want to be with him, and Zach’s voice has given that doubt a rallying point, a see, it’s not just me! for his brain to wield as a cudgel.

God, Mike doesn’t know what to do – he barely knows how to make sense of all these emotions. He can feel himself deflating a bit as he finishes undressing, content enough to just sleep in his boxers, and his shoulders slump as he sinks back onto the edge of his mattress.
The book he’s borrowing from El is pressed against his thigh, the edge of the spine digging into him a bit, and he picks it back up, cradling it once more. A smile comes to his face, unbidden, breaking through the clouds that are threatening to swallow him whole. And, before he’s even fully aware of what he’s doing, he sets the book down in the middle of the bed and reaches for his phone as he slides under the covers.

*getting ready to finish storm front, prepare for my incoming review*, is what he texts El, hoping that he’s not texting too late or anything (and knowing that, even if he is, she’ll see it in the morning).

At best, he’s hoping to get a text back in a couple of minutes if she’s still awake. At worst, he knows she’ll see it tomorrow and corner him once they’re in Trig.

But what he gets instead is the buzzing of his phone a minute later, El’s name flashing across the screen with her incoming call.

The smile on Mike’s face grows to face-splitting proportions – *Zach, who?* – and he rushes to answer. “Isn’t it a little late to be calling?” he says in lieu of a greeting.

“Oh my god, how close are you? How many more pages? What’s happening?” The questions come at him rapid fire, El’s voice high-pitched and giddy with excitement, like she can’t contain herself.

Mike can’t help it – he laughs as he settles into bed, leaning back against the pillows. “Ok, wow, slow your roll there,” he says, humor laced in every word. “I didn’t say I was currently reading it, just that I’m getting ready to finish. Besides, I have, like….” He trails off, grabbing the book with the hand not holding his phone so he can thumb through the pages, roughly counting how many are left. “50 pages to go until I finish. It’s not like I’m down to the last 5 pages and asking you to wait on the line while I finish them.”

“Well, how long would it take you to read 50 pages?” El asks and, if Mike’s not mistaken, there’s a needy edge to El’s voice. “Because I can wait – would be happy to, really. I just… need to talk to you about this book. I’ve been waiting for you to finish it so we can flail about it.”

God, how is this his life right now? It’s late at night and he’s talking to the girl he has a massive crush on about her favorite book, the one she’s dying for him to finish so she can talk to him about it. “You mean you haven’t gotten it all out of your system with Will?”

“Well, I mean, I liked talking to Will about it, but….” El trails off, her breath leaving her in a soft sigh that sends a shiver skittering down his spine. “Will’s not you.”

*Oh, that’s… amazing.*

Mike has to hold back the lovesick sigh that threatens to escape him, but he can’t stop smiling like a fool. “Well, I should be finished with it before midnight. We can talk about it tomorrow, I promise.”

A squeal comes from the other end of the line, ending in a bright giggle that sets Mike’s soul aflame. “Ok, ok, tomorrow, lunch, out on the bleachers, you and me – we’re gonna get into it. Be ready to give me everything you got, ok? I wanna hear it, so don’t hold anything back. The full Mike Wheeler opinion, nothing less.”

Mike’s heart leaps into his throat. El’s asking – no, *telling* – him to have lunch with her, *just the two of them*, so they can talk about something absolutely non-school related. For a moment, panic spikes in his veins, stabbing him in the heart – *people could see, people could talk* – and the bruises on his shoulder dig into his skin with a painful throb, a reminder that someone is *always* watching.
But a surge of relief washes through him as he realizes El's proposing they eat lunch outside on the bleachers… where no one can see them. They'll be safe from prying, judging eyes and the knot of uncertainty, of panic, in his stomach untangles itself. “I’ll put it in my calendar,” he says, voice husky with relief, excitement beginning to build in his veins at the thought of spending more time with El.

“Excellent, perfect!” El says, another giggle escaping her. “Ok, I’m gonna let you go so you can get on finishing that book and – yeah, I’ll let you go. God, I can’t wait until tomorrow. You have no idea how excited I am.”

“Oh, I think I have some idea,” Mike says, almost murmuring the words. He closes his eyes, letting himself luxuriate in the sound of her voice in his ear, and breathes out a soft sigh. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Night, El.”

El lets out what sounds like a low hum of pleasure, happy and peaceful and soft all at the same time. Mike just wants to wrap himself in that sound and live in it for the rest of his life. “Night, Mike. Have fun reading! Can’t wait to see you tomorrow.”

Mike hangs up first, hurrying to do it lest he say something embarrassing, like accidentally blurting out that he’s falling in love with her or something. But there’s no stopping the pitter-patter of his heart or the army of butterflies that have taken over his stomach, filling him with a dizzying, swooping sensation like he’s flying and falling all at once.

Unable to stop smiling, Mike sets his alarm, puts his phone down on the nightstand, and opens El’s book to where he last left off. It doesn’t take him long to get back into it, eyes rapidly drinking in every word on the page, and he easily lets himself get sucked into the climax of the story, the rousing heroics as the main character solves the mystery and saves the day.

It’s just before midnight by the time Mike finishes the book and he puts it down next to his phone with a mental note to return it to El in the morning. He’s eager, in a way that only El can bring out in him, to go to school tomorrow, eager to see her again and talk to her and just be with her.

He falls asleep, still smiling, excitement temporarily calming so he can wrap himself in it gently, like it’s a warm and cozy blanket on a cold winter’s night.

But, the entire time, the bruises on his shoulder throb low and steady against his skin. The pain burrows deep into the back of his mind, seeking out the dark corners of his mind….

Waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, and here you were thinking (hoping?) I'd left Zach behind. NOPE. Homeboy's got some more fucking up of shit left to do for our dear protagonists. His part to play is nowhere near done, muahahaha.

For the next chapter, I'm hoping it'll be another couple of weeks like this time? It's gonna be longer than this one, I already know it, so maybe three weeks instead of two. Hopefully. In the meantime, though, come bug me on tumblr @fatechica! I've been trying to be more active there recently now that my life's settled down a bit and I miss all of you. So, if you're a fan of someone ranting about mileven in the tags, then boy do I have a bunch of stuff you'll like. Catch y'all on the flip side!
...suddenly they become so much better

Chapter Notes

I just...this chapter, I.....have no words. Because I've used them all in the chapter. All 28k of them.

Yes, that's right. In a little over a week, I've written 28k words for this fic. And I don't know how.

So, yeah, I'm just gonna let you all go and enjoy this spectacular piece of word vomit.

keep your arms and legs inside the ride at all times, folks. it's a doozy......

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s Tuesday, the fourth one of the school year, and it’s official: El Hopper is in love.

She has to be – it’s the only reasonable explanation for how she feels, for what’s happening to her. There’s no other way to explain the tremulous fluttering in her chest, the way the rest of the world ceases to exist whenever she’s in the same room as him… the way she only has eyes for the beautiful boy who’s totally and completely stolen her heart.

Case in point: El’s sitting in the cafeteria on this fine Tuesday in late September, supposedly having lunch with Carrie and some of Carrie’s friends from Yearbook and Student Government. But what she’s really doing is staring across the cafeteria at Mike where he’s sitting with the rest of his friends, all of them smiling and laughing and having a good time.

I wonder what he’s thinking about. El sighs, chin resting in the palm of one hand as she stares, all lovesick and twitterpated. Is he thinking about me? At least a little bit? God, I hope so.

As she watches, Mike turns to look over from Will to Dustin and, on his way, his gaze passes over her. El catches his eye and Mike freezes, just for a second, eyes wide and inscrutable. But, then, he smiles, just the tiniest quirk of his lips, a smile meant just for her.

The sight of it sets her heart racing and El smiles back, a fierce blush blooming on her cheeks. She looks away when it all gets to be too much, gaze ducking, almost demurely, as she reaches up with one hand to tuck her hair behind her ear, a nervous and delicate motion that is undeniably flirty despite it all.

Her heart feels like she’s just run a marathon, her blood sizzling with adrenaline, and El looks back up at Mike. He’s no longer looking at her, refocusing his attentions on whatever’s happening at his table, but there’s a light blush on his cheeks that wasn’t there moments ago and her stomach swoops dangerously. She feels like she’s moments away from just marching across the cafeteria and doing something bold and crazy like kiss him in front of the entire school.

God, she can practically picture it: her steps, sure and purposeful, as she strides across the open cafeteria floor; Mike looking at her with warm confusion as she gets near; her hands reaching down
to cup his face, skin warm beneath her fingers; him leaning up as she bends down, confusion all but gone as their mouths meet in a scorching hot kiss that lights her afame; his lips soft and warm and demanding as he kisses her back, not caring that everyone’s watching them, his arms encircling her waist to pull her onto his lap and…. 

“El! Hey, Earth to El! You in there?”

The voice—Carrie’s—rings loudly against her eardrum as an elbow nudges her none-so-gently, digging into her ribs.

El jumps and lets out a squeal of surprise. Her blush turns full-on crimson as she’s yanked rudely out of her fantasy, her face bright enough that she’s sure it has to be visible from space. “What? Hi, yes, um… what?” The words come out in a tumbled rush and El looks around the table to see everyone looking back at her with amused grins on their faces.

“Wow, you were really zoned out there. Where’d you go while you were off in La La Land?” Carrie asks, grin turning cheeky, one eyebrow arched almost knowingly.

“Oh, um, you know….” El trails off and waves one hand through the air with a vague sweeping motion. “Just… thinking.”

“Clearly our company isn’t engaging enough.” This is spoken by Alan Chung, who is Carrie’s boyfriend and Student Body Vice President and he says the words in such a way as to let El know that he’s joking. “The great El Hopper has much bigger standards for how she wants to be entertained.”

“Ugh, Alan, stop,” Carrie says, grinning despite the way she rolls her eyes. “That’s not what’s going on.”

A snort comes from another corner of the table, this from Jessie Spearman, who’s the Assistant Editor of the Yearbook and one of Carrie’s really good friends. “No, clearly this is about a boy.” Jessie pauses, thinking, dark eyebrows coming together as she thinks. “Or a girl, I guess, though little Miss Hopper has given us no indication that she swings that way at all.”

El frowns. “Not true. There have been girls I’ve been attracted to, but….” El lets her gaze slide back over to where Mike’s sitting and she sighs. No one, man, woman, or anything in between, will ever compare to Mike Wheeler and that’s a fact. She wants to drown in him and never find her way back to the surface; she wants to get lost in darkness of his gaze, the timbre of his voice, the way he makes her feel like she’s the only person on the face of the planet when they spend time together. God, she just wants so badly and –

Another elbow to the ribs pulls her back to the present again and El lets out a yelp this time. “See? Only love can do this to a person,” Jessie says and the look on her face turns devilish as a grin twists her lips. “Ok, El, spill it. Who’s the guy?”

Carrie lets out a giggle. “Yes, El, please tell us what kind of guy your average beautiful and sophisticated New Yorker finds attractive?”

El eyes the table, one eyebrow arched as she looks at the assembled faces. “You guys promise not to laugh at me?” She’s not ashamed of her feelings for Mike, not at all, but after what happened when she told Jen, she’s really not in the mood to experience that level of drama.

“Hey, we’re all about not kink shaming at this table,” Alan says. “You do you, as I always say.”

Carrie rolls her eyes at her boyfriend and sighs. “What my well-intentioned if idiotic boyfriend is
trying to say is that we would never make fun of you for liking who you like.”

“Yeah,” Jessie chimes in. “That kind of shit is reserved for the Stacey and her sycophants.” She pauses, an eyebrow arched at El knowingly. “No offense to any of your other friends, of course.”

El lets out a sigh, knowing that it’s true. “None taken.” The reassurances from the table ease the knot of anxiety in her stomach and El smiles, relieved.

“So? Who’s the guy?” Jessie asks. “Cause I’m dying to know now.”

The smile on El’s face turns giddy as she thinks about the boy she’s 100% sure she’s fallen for.

“Mike Wheeler.”

For half a moment, there’s a stunned silence. “Oh my god, no way,” Jessie breathes, awe dawning on her face and slowly taking over her expression. “Like, A/V Club President, Mike Wheeler?”


Carrie turns to El and smiles, looking almost smug. “I knew it! I knew something was going on there. The two of you always look so chummy when you come in to Chemistry together.”

“Never mind how you were practically sitting on his lap last week during lunch – yes, we all saw, so don’t deny it,” Alan says with a snicker in his voice. “Though never thought I’d see the day where the popular and beautiful new girl would go for Hawkins High’s resident nerd. Guess it really does take all kinds, doesn’t it?”

“Oh my god, stop,” Carrie says. “Why do I even like you?”

“Because I’m sweet and I let you have more than half my french fries?” Alan offers, glancing down at the tray that once held a grilled cheese sandwich and a pile of fries.

Carrie giggles and leans over to give her boyfriend a quick kiss. “Oh, yeah, that’s right.”

Jessie looks over at El, shaking her head fondly at the cute display in front of her, and smiles. “So, you two going to go to Homecoming together?”

El sighs with undisguised longing. She thinks about the Homecoming flyers that are posted around school, the ones announcing the ticket sales and theme (“Fall Into the Season”) and the date, two weeks from this Saturday, just enough time to go shopping and pick out a beautiful dress. She snagged a copy of the flier when they were being passed out in Homeroom earlier that morning, just to make sure she wouldn’t forget any of the details, and it’s like it’s burning a hole in her backpack, waiting for her to gather up the courage to do something about it.

“I don’t know if he’s going to ask me,” El says, knowing that Mike probably won’t. But, god, the thought of Mike asking her, all sweet and shy and perfect, stumbling a little over the words as an adorable blush creeps up over his cheeks? Oh, that makes her heart feel all sorts of fluttery and she has to gulp back the sighing giggle that wants to escape her. Maybe there’s a way I can give him the hint that I want him to ask me, El thinks, feeling all giddy at the prospect. But, worse comes to worst, El knows…. “If he doesn’t, though, I’ll ask him, instead.”

“Yes, seize the bull by those horns,” Alan says, all teasing cheer and affirmation. “Besides, guys like it when girls take the initiative. Takes all the guesswork out of it for us.”

“Yeah, but it’s not really that romantic, is it?” Jessie fires back with before she looks at Carrie with a look brimming with sympathy. “Carrie, my dear, I’m so sorry your boyfriend is an unromantic lout.”
Carrie giggles as Alan splutters out an offended “Hey!” and then the rest of the table is laughing, El right along with the rest of them and, for the moment, she lets herself live in the simple joy of this moment, of spending time with friends, laughing over something silly.

But then Jessie turns back to her, a smile on her face. “But, seriously, good for you. You know who you want and you’re going after him. Hopefully he likes you back, though I’m not sure who wouldn’t. Like, anyone in this school would be lucky to be with you. And I haven’t spent a lot of time with Mike, but I’ve had a couple of classes with him over the years and he’s a nice guy.” She pauses, shrugging. “A little nerdy, maybe, but nice. Don’t know if I’ve ever heard of him having a girlfriend before, so he’s probably gonna be pretty new to all of this, just fair warning.”

The words serve as something of a reality check and fondness fills El’s heart with unbearable softness. She knows Mike is special, someone any one would be lucky to be with, but she can tell he’s been hurt before even if she doesn’t know how and it’s a good reminder to take extra care with his heart… if Mike for sure even likes her back, that is.

*Cross that bridge when I get to it*, El thinks, brushing aside the way her heart squeezes painfully at the thought of Mike not liking her back in the same way. Instead, she focuses on how determination fills her, how it makes her heart race with excited anticipation. “Thanks for the warning,” El says, nodding at Jessie. “I wanna make sure I do this right.”

“God, I can’t wait to see how Stacey and her little clique react to you and Mike going to Homecoming together,” Carrie says with a snicker. “Like, she is *not* going to approve of you two.”

El sits up straight and sniffs in prim derision. “Well, Stacey can take her opinion and stuff it. She’s not the boss of me. I like who I like and the only other person who’s part of the conversation is the person I’m attracted to.”

“Well, if there’s anyone in this school who can stand up to Stacey and her little draconian dictatorship, it’s probably you,” Jessie says. “Honestly, I don’t know how you stand being friends with her.”

El shrugs and picks at the remnants of her lunch. “Honestly, I don’t know either, sometimes. I mostly hang out with that group for the girls who are on Pep Squad with me, like Jen and Ashley and stuff. And Stacey’s not *all* bad, but… yeah, she’s a little –”


Carrie lets out a snort. “Yeah, try *all of the above.*”

“Yeah, that’s the part I don’t like,” El says. “Which is why I only eat lunch with them about once a week.” Honestly, El’s pretty proud of the groups of friends she’s managed to become a part of outside of the popular girl clique – Mike and his friends, Lily and the other theater kids, the friends she’s made from her Photography elective, Carrie and her friends – hell, she’s even started making friends with the guys from the Basketball team thanks to the game she went to last Saturday night as part of the Pep Squad. It lets her float from group to group and she’s getting to the point where she pretty much sits with a different group during lunch every day of the week.

Really, the only exception to this so far has been last week where she ate lunch with Mike and his friends on Thursday and then ate lunch with just Mike on Friday so they could have an in-depth conversation about the first Dresden Files novel.

*(if el tries hard enough, she can pretend it was like she and mike were out on a date – just the two of them, sitting on the bleachers, facing each other as they ate lunch under the midday sun. his eyes*
were bright and happy as they talked, hands moving with rapid pace as he gestured to go with the animated pace of his words. Their legs were folded in front of them, knees just touching, and it was the most thrilling feeling El’s ever experienced in her entire life, being so close to him while his attention was 100% focused on her and their conversation. She wanted so bad to lean over and kiss him so many times, to have his lips move against hers in a kiss instead of in the shape of his words, and she’s amazed she barely managed to hold herself back. God, she just wants, so badly, to be with him.

But, well, there’s always an exception to everything. And, really, El has more things to worry about than making sure she’s spreading her time evenly between all her various friends groups. Or even Stacey’s subpar treatment of others (which El knows she’s going to have to deal with sooner rather than later, if she’s being honest with herself, but it’s not big enough of an issue… yet).

No, for the moment, there’s only one thing El’s worried about…

And that’s making sure her and Mike go to Homecoming together.

The way El sees it, at the end of the day, she knows she can just ask Mike herself. But, probably to nobody’s surprise, El’s something of a romantic and she just loves the idea of Mike asking her. So much so that she’s going to at least try, over the next few days, to drop just the right kinds of hints that, hey, maybe he should ask her to the dance.

And if that doesn’t work, El figures she’ll at least have given him the signals that she’s interested in going to the dance with him. That way, if she ends up having to ask him, it won’t come as a complete surprise. Because in so many ways, Mike reminds her of nothing more than an adorable, skittish colt – one wrong move and he’ll go running off in the other direction faster than she can blink.

El pretty much finishes coming up with her plan by the end of US History (during which she can’t stop herself at all from stealing glances over at Mike during the lecture; occasionally, she manages to look at him while he’s looking over at her and, oh, the tingly feeling that goes running across every nerve whenever that happens is enough to take her breath away). But she holds off once class has ended, even though she knows she has every opportunity to kick things off on the brief walk she and Mike have from US History to Chemistry. She just doesn’t want to have this conversation where there are so many people and busy school hallways in between periods are no place to start implementing such a delicate plan, after all.

So, El decides to talk about something else instead:

Logistics for their study session after school that day.

It’s going to be the third time she and Mike meet up after school to work on homework since getting paired up for US History and the second day in a row after meeting up at Mike’s house yesterday. And, with a test coming up in Trig on Friday, a Chem test the following Monday, and an outline of their History project due Thursday, they decided to just continue combining their efforts.

Plus, El’s started asking Mike for a little bit of help in her English class, giving them more reason to talk and spend time together. Not a lot of help – El’s not completely hopeless, after all – but just enough guidance to make her feel better about her work.
But El has a… suggestion for where to get together to study and do homework.

“Hey, so, I was thinking, for tonight….” El says, trailing off with a teasing lilt to her voice, grabbing at Mike’s elbow with her hand to get his attention.

(even though she can feel the tension radiating off of him, knowing he’s painfully aware of her presence next to him, their arms brush against each other’s every few steps as they walk, the heat of the contact searing into her skin through the thin blouse she’s wearing, and it takes everything she has to keep from grabbing his hand and lacing their fingers together. she hopes that the tension she can feel from him is a good one, that he likes being as close to her as she does to him.)

Mike looks over at her with an arched eyebrow and, deep around the edges of his gaze, she can see what she can only describe as awe, barely perceptible through the amusement that’s predominantly shining from his eyes. It’s so reaffirming that he looks at her and sees someone amazing and El would be lying if she said it wasn’t also incredibly addicting. Mike makes her feel like she can do anything and it’s the best feeling in the world.

“Uh oh, you thinking? That sounds dangerous,” he says, voice quiet but teasing, completely without pause. This is a more recent development, the lack of hesitation when engaging in what’s becoming their normal flirty back-and-forth, and El loves it. She loves that Mike feels comfortable enough to tease her without fear, without worry of how she’s going to respond.

Still doesn’t mean she doesn’t respond, though. El pouts up at him, giving him her best wounded pout. “You’re so mean to me, did you know that?”

There’s a hitch in Mike’s breathing, audible only because they’re walking so closely together. And, if El’s not mistaken, Mike’s gaze drops briefly down to her mouth, lingering long enough that it makes her feel all squirmy inside. “Oh, please, I’m the opposite of mean,” Mike says, sounding a tad more breathless than he did just a moment ago. “So, go on, tell me your idea.”

The pout on El’s face disappears as a smile takes its place, all giddy and giggly. “Well, I was thinking, we could actually have our study session at my house tonight. My dad’s working late, so it’ll be quiet, and we can, like, order pizza or something for dinner. This way, we don’t have to take a break to eat. And I like your mom’s cooking, and all – really, her food’s so good – but we’ll be able to get more work done.” She pauses, eyebrows arching as she looks up at him. “So, whaddya think? Sound good?”

Mike stares at her, wide eyed, as they approach their Chemistry classroom. His face has gone slack with what El is hoping is shock and not fear, and it takes him moving his mouth a couple of moments before sounds actually comes out. “Oh, um, your dad, he won’t… be there?”

El lets out a sighing giggle. “Yeah, well, sometimes he has to work late – covering his guys’ shifts, and all, so they can have a night off.”

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At that, El can’t help but grin at what Mike’s hinting at. “You mean he won’t mind his teenage daughter alone at home with a boy?” El says, grin growing, almost gleefully wicked. “Well, I trust you won’t take advantage of the situation.” She slows down as they get to the door to their Chemistry class and turns to look at him fully. There’s a blush on Mike’s face that is spreading as the seconds go by and, lord, does she love pushing his buttons like this, seeing how far she can go. “Besides, my dad knows I know how to handle myself if you do something I don’t want you to. And, well…..” She trails off, giving herself a moment to give him a very heavy look, gaze traveling
down and up his frame. “You know.”

She’s not going to come out and say it – that there’s not much he could do that she doesn’t want him to do – since it’s a little too early to be putting that sentiment to words. But it’s clear Mike picks up on her meaning anyway and he turns almost crimson with the insinuation. Pleased beyond measure, El lets out what can only be described as a flirty giggle and winks up at him. “‘M gonna head on in. See you out in the parking lot after your practice.”

This is how, a few hours later, she finds herself at her house, her and Mike sitting at the kitchen table….

Alone.

Contrary to what she hinted at with her over-the-top flirtatiousness, however, they really are working – there’s too much on her plate worry about school-wise for El to test out putting the moves on Mike. Besides, she’s honestly committed to taking things slow with him. She really wants to get this right and rushing things has only come back to bite her in the ass before, so she’d rather not have that happen with Mike, thank you very much.

Mike’s a little tense as they get started, looking over his shoulder like her dad’s going to jump out and accuse him of “taking advantage of my little girl”, but he relaxes as they get into doing their homework, first working on US History and then moving on to studying for their Trig test. They keep working until they start to get hungry a couple of hours into their study session and El orders a couple of pizzas with some of her saved-up allowance money, knowing if she makes sure to get some for her dad that he’ll pay her back when he gets home.

Agreeing to take a short break to eat a couple of slices, Mike moves aside their things while El goes over to the fridge and grabs them a couple of sodas. “Coke or root beer?” El asks, holding out the crisply cold cans, the chilled aluminium biting into her skin.

Mike narrows his eyes in consideration, chewing on his lower lip as he decides. “Um...coke, please.”

El sits down as she hands him his soda. “Here you go,” she says.

“Thanks,” Mike says with a small smile and, for a couple of moments, they eat in silence. It’s nice, El realizes, nice and domestic and quaint in a way that tugs at her heart strings. It makes her want this, the quiet intimacy, the way this feels both exciting and soothing at the same time, knowing that there’s no one there to bother them or judge them. A seed of yearning buries itself deep in her heart and El knows it’s just going to keep growing until it overtakes her entirely. But, for the moment, she’s just enjoying being with Mike like this, where they’re both relaxed and happy and at ease with each other.

This is your chance, you know, comes the whisper from the back of her mind. El realizes the voice is right: they’re alone, no embarrassing parents or siblings to get in the middle of their conversation, and they’re taking a short break from schoolwork, so she won’t be distracting them. Besides, if she looks over at her stack of papers sitting on the table, the ones she pulled from her backpack, she can see the bright pink paper that the flyer for Homecoming is printed on amongst the stack and it’s taunting her, reminding her of her plan with niggling intensity.

El takes a sip of her root beer to clear her throat and draws in a deep breath, readying herself. She glances at Mike who’s sitting across the table from her, looking down at his own plate, completely relaxed and seemingly content. Ok, you can do this, she thinks, giving herself a pep talk. Just don’t be so obvious that you scare him off entirely and you’ll be good.
“So, I got a question for you,” El says once she thinks she’s ready.

Mike raises his gaze to look at her, brows arched just a bit, looking both curious and concerned at the same time. “Yeah, shoot,” he says before he takes a bite of his pizza.

El grins, wrinkling her nose for added effect, and folds her arms in front of her on the table. “Can you explain Homecoming to me? Like, what’s the big deal exactly? Is it like it is in the movies?”

Mike startles, caught off guard by the question, and he goes a little pale as he chews and swallows the food in his mouth. Given how El’s only a couple of feet away, she can very easily see the way this makes the freckles on his cheeks and nose stand out and her fingers itch to reach across to trace every pattern she can possible find in them and then some. “Oh, um, I don’t… really know.” He licks his lips and lets out a shaky breath. “You’ve never been?”

El shrugs, trying to come across as more relaxed than she’s feeling. “My old school really didn’t have Homecoming. At best, we had this, like, Fall Harvest dance, so my only knowledge about Homecoming comes from teen movies.” She’s careful to keep her tone inquisitive and casual, like she’s not really invested in this at all (even though she is so very, very much).

Mike seems to relax, a little bit of color returning to his face. “Yeah, I imagine it’s pretty similar to what you’ve seen in movies. You know, big football game, parade, cheesy dance and the whole bit.” He shrugs, echoing her previous movement. “At least, I’m assuming. I’ve never been.”

If El hadn’t found out earlier that he’d never had a girlfriend, assuming what Jessie told her is true, she’d be surprised at this – never been to Homecoming? With how cute he is? Impossible! But, really, she just feels for him, especially given the way his voice turns down, sounding small and lost and almost heart-broken. God, if El ever meets any of the girls who’ve made Mike feel like this….

“Never wanted to go?” El asks as her head tilts just so to one side. She’s pretty sure she knows what the answer is, but she very much wants to hear what he has to say.

Mike gives her a smile that is harsh, almost bitter, before it disappears and he breathes out a hollow laugh. “Never had anyone to go with. Or….” He trails off, shaking his head as he looks down at his plate. “Never had anyone who wanted to go with me, actually.”

There’s something in Mike’s voice that tugs at every heart string El has and her grin softens into a small smile, turning warm and gentle. “Now that I find hard to believe.” El waits until Mike’s looking back up at her, until her gaze meets his, the look in his eyes both hopeful and confused, before she continues. “I’m positive there’s someone out there who’s wanted to go to Homecoming with you.” Me, if no one else, she thinks but doesn’t say.

Mike stares at her for a long moment, as if trying to decipher what she’s saying, but he looks away after a second, as if holding her gaze is too hard. “Thanks, but….” He closes his eyes, shaking his head just a bit as he lets out another one of those hollow laughs. It’s like he can’t bring himself anywhere close to accepting her compliment, like believing in what she’s saying is absolutely impossible.

“What about you?” he asks once he’s opened his eyes, jaw clenching like he’s determined to ignore whatever negative spiral of emotions are twisting inside of him, and El’s more than a little impressed at his resolve. Plus, it’s attractive as hell. “You interested in going?”

El’s breath catches in her throat and her palms suddenly feel a little clammy as excitement thrums low and steady inside of her

This is it. This is her moment.
El giggles, unable to help herself, and gives him a soft smile. She knows she can’t keep what she’s really thinking off her face and, well, too late to stop now (honestly, her self control around Mike is atrocious). “Yeah, if the right person asked me,” she says, the arch of her eyebrow heavy with meaning.

Mike gulps, his Adam’s apple bobbing hard beneath his skin as his cheeks warm oh so slightly. “Oh,” he all but squeaks out, voice tight and a little breathless, looking at her like he can’t believe what she’s saying, like there’s no way he’s hearing her right.

El lets out another giggle, more amused than anything (she’s not laughing at him – she’s not – but Mike’s the cutest guy she’s ever seen in her entire life and she loves how easily she overwhelms him). “What about you? You gonna go?”

The question jolts him and he looks at her with wide eyes, like the meaning of it is filtering through the layers of his brain. “Probably not,” Mike says after a moment, with a shake of his head. “Just….” He sighs, sounding impossibly sad. “Probably not.”

El wishes she knew what he was going to say. But she knows it’s all she’s going to get from him about this for the moment, so she decides to move on. “Well, I hope you change your mind.” She shrugs. “At the very least, it’s always fun to get dressed up and go dancing like a crazy person. Definitely one of my favorite activities.”

A snort escapes Mike and he looks at her, humor rising in his gaze, the sad awkwardness fading as the focus moves off of him. “You would think that, wouldn’t you?”

“Live like there’s no tomorrow, I always say.” There’s a cheek-splitting grin on her face and laughter bubbles up inside of her, giddy and relieved that she actually managed to follow through and pull off her plan. She laid the groundwork for Homecoming, gave Mike the hint that she’d be more than open to him asking her, and didn’t make a fool of herself in the process. Wins all around, really.

Some of El’s jubilation escapes her in a low chuckle as she gestures at him with her half-eaten slice of pizza. “C’mon, we should get back to work. I still want to ask you a couple of questions about my English assignment before you head home.”

Mike gives her a look, gaze flat with one eyebrow arched dryly. “Oh, so this is going to be a regular thing, you asking for help with your English class.”

El looks right back and feels her lips curl up in a challenging grin. “Hey, you offered to help, remember? You gonna reneg?”

Mike breathes out a laugh, shaking his head with amusement. “No, just… you’re something else, you know that?”

“In a good way or a bad way?” El asks, biting down on her lower lip to keep from smiling too much, feeling light and bubbly from the humor that builds in her veins.

“Don’t know yet,” Mike says. His lips twitch like he’s trying to tamp down his own smile and he’s barely succeeding. “When I figure it out, I’ll let you know.”

“I’m gonna hold you to that,” El says as she arches her eyebrows in warning. “Gonna set a reminder to ask you and everything.”

Mike rolls his eyes and the laugh that escapes him sounds a little breathless. “God, what am I…?” He lets the rest of his sentence go unsaid as he shakes his head. “Never mind, let’s just get back to work.”
They’re in a good mood as they get back to it. They finish up working on Trig as they eat the last of their pizza, El making sure that some is left for her dad, and have moved on to Chemistry by the time Hopper gets home.

El misses the sight of her dad’s headlights coming up the driveway, too focused on listening to Mike to have awareness for anything else. They’re taking turns quizzing each other with the flashcards she made and it’s Mike’s turn to ask the questions and neither of them hear her dad come in through the front door as Mike reads out another question.

“How many total electrons can occupy the principle energy level?” Mike asks, gaze darting back and forth between her and the index cards in his hands, lips quirking in an encouraging smile.

El closes her eyes, squinting behind her eyelids as she tries to picture the answer. God, she can just see it…. “Um, it’s…..”

But, before El can answer, Hopper’s booming voice explodes in the air around them. “What’s this? Clothes and hair are all in place? No hint of alcohol or drugs? Huh, guess you really are studying.”

Several things happen in the immediate aftermath of Hop’s entrance, many of them all at once. El’s eyes fly open, a tiny shriek escaping her as she nearly topples out of her chair in surprise. Meanwhile, the air leaves Mike’s lungs in a panicked “holy shit!”, flashcards flying through the air with a heavy flutter they startle out of his grip.

And, all the while, El can hear the sounds of her dad desperately trying not to laugh out loud and she whirls around to glare at him as she regains her balance. “Dad, oh my god, warn us next time!” She pauses, mind going over what her dad just said, and a blush creeps up her cheeks despite herself. “And, ugh, I told you we were going to be studying. Thanks for thinking I might be a liar, though.”

El glances over at Mike, apology heavy in her gaze. He manages to give her a tight smile as he works to gather the flashcards back up into a single stack, but his face is both pale and flushed at the same time, panic and embarrassment warring for control of his expression.

“Yeah, well, there’s a big difference between studying and studying.” Hop emphasizes his point with liberal use of air quotes as he goes over to the fridge, reaching in for what El accurately guesses is a beer. “Let me tell you, I did a lot of studying when I was your age, if you catch my drift.”

El rolls her eyes as her dad waggles his eyebrows, comically exaggerated, and she would be more amused if Mike didn’t look like he was two heartbeats away from gathering his things into a hasty pile in his arms and running out the door screaming. “Ew, no one needs to hear about this, Dad.” God, the last thing she wants to hear about at all in front of Mike – or at all, really – is her dad’s sex life.

“Eh, someday you’ll understand,” Hop says with a dismissive wave of the hand not holding his beer as he strides over to the pizza El set aside for him on the counter. “So, how’s it going, you two? Getting some good studying done?”

El looks over at Mike to see him looking back at her, confusion reflected in his wide-eyed gaze. “Good, we were just studying for our Chem test next week when you rudely barged in and scared the crap out of us.”

“How can a man rudely barge into his own home, I ask you?” Hop murmurs as he puts a couple of slices on a plate and comes to sit down at the chair where he tossed his jacket.

“Exactly how you did it, by creeping into the kitchen like a troll and not announcing your presence when you walked through the front door,” El says, brow raised just slightly as she stares at Hop from
across the table. “And, you know, accusing me of going behind your back, but that’s another issue entirely.”

“Eh, agree to disagree,” Hopper says before he takes a bite of his pizza. “So, Mike, is it?” he says a second later.

“I, um….” Mike trails off, looking to El for help or rescue or something.

El gives Mike a soft smile before turning back to her dad, startled panic fading into something closer to the normal fond annoyance she feels towards her dad when he’s in one of these moods, the one where it’s his mission to troll her as hard as humanly possible. “Yes, Dad, this is Mike. I told you in my text message, remember?” She looks at Mike, a teasing grin on her face. “Mike, I apologize for my dad’s total inability to do the things a good host does, like remember the names of his guests. Dementia: it’s a bitch.” That earns her a small smile – nothing more than a quick twitch of Mike’s lips, but it’s better than nothing, and she can see the way his eyes begin to warm with amusement.

“Hey!” Hopper says, pointing at her with one of the slices of his pizza. “I’m not decrepit yet, missy. You still got years left of me tormenting you with all my faculties intact, so show a little respect.”

El just arches an eyebrow. “Wow, wasn’t it you who taught me that respect is a two-way street?”

She and Hop stare at each other, gazes locked, for a couple of long and heavy seconds before Hop pointedly turns his gaze over to Mike. “So, Mike, El tells me you’re one of the smartest kids she’s ever met.”

Mike breathes out a nervous laugh. “I, um… really? That’s not true, there are people who are way smarter than me out there.”

“Not to hear El tell it. From what I hear, you’re in all the honors classes you can get into. That’s pretty smart in my book.”

Mike blushes to the tips of his ears and his fingers fidget with the corners of the flashcards he’s still holding. “Oh, um… thank you?”

El gives Mike another gentle smile before she looks pointedly at her dad. “Ok, are you gonna bother us for the rest of the evening? Or can Mike and I get back to studying?”

Hopper holds his hands up in surrender before he grabs his plate and his beer. “Alright, I know where I’m not wanted,” he says as he stands. “Guess I’ll just go eat in the family room. Sheesh, banished from my own kitchen….” His grumblings follow him as he leaves the kitchen and it’s only when El hears Hop settling down on the couch does she let out a sigh of relief.

“I’m so sorry about my dad,” El says, cringing a bit as she looks at Mike. “Normally, I’m the only victim of his trolling; didn’t mean to get you caught in the blast zone.”

“Oh, it’s ok,” Mike says through a dry chuckle, shrugging one shoulder almost lazily as he leans back into the chair. “What was it you said? About how parents are embarrassing?”

A huffed laugh escapes her and El finds herself rolling her eyes. “Oh, I remember. I think the key difference is my dad means to get a reaction out of me whereas I don’t think your mom does it intentionally.”

That earns her a full on laugh. “Oh, clearly you don’t know my mother very well yet,” Mike says. “Give it time and you’ll see how she lives to torment me.”
El giggles. “Hmm, maybe we should form a survivor’s group, or something, for teens who’ve been unfairly trolled by their parents.” A soft smile begins to creep up onto her face, unbearable fondness filling her as she looks across the table at Mike, almost unable to believe they’re sitting here like this, talking without it being weird or awkward or anything.

“You bring the coffee, I’ll bring the cookies,” Mike says with a chuckle. A second later, though, the amusement on his face fades away, replaced by gentle apology. “I should probably get going, though. It’s after 8:30 and I told my mom I’d be home by 9. But you can call me if you still want help with your English class later.”

“Yeah, sure, sounds good,” El says as she and Mike begin separating out their things, which have combined into a messy pile in the middle of the table. “Besides, it’s only a matter of time before my dad finds something on TV to watch and I don’t wanna have us deal with working through that noise – not when we’re trying to study.”

“We could still get together on Thursday to study for Trig though, if you wanted,” Mike says. He pauses, glancing behind him in the direction where Hop disappeared off to. “Maybe at my house, though, yeah?” he says, grinning almost mischievously.

That earns Mike a surprised laugh and El brings up a hand to cover her mouth. “Oh, god, definitely. Your mom at least won’t barge in accusing us of getting up to no good.”

Mike blushes, but he’s still chuckling. “Yeah, that sure was something,” he says, squirming a little, gaze ducking as he finishes gathering up his things and cramming them into his backpack.

El decides to spare him from having to talk about that anymore – poor boy’s had enough torment for one night – and lets the topic drop. “Here, let me walk you out.”

Mike looks over at her, head snapping up so fast, it causes his hair to fall into his eyes and he has to reach up with one hand to push his hair back. “Oh, um, you don’t have to do that.”

El’s heart most definitely gives the most lovesick skip at the sight of Mike running his fingers through his hair and she can’t help but smile, a bright giggle escaping from between her lips. “Hey, you’re my guest and I insist. Don’t force me to be rude, Mike Wheeler.”

“Ok, ok, fine,” Mike says as a small smile graces his mouth. “Wouldn’t want to force you to be rude, and all.”

“Aww, always the gentleman,” El says with a flirty lilt, one hand coming up so she can wrap a lock of hair around one finger.

“Well, I certainly try,” Mike says as El starts to lead them towards the front door.

She opens the door and steps aside so Mike can walk out into the night air. “I’ll call you later, yeah?”

Mike turns around as he steps over the threshold. “For your English assignment.”

“Or not,” El giggles. “I could just call you because I want to talk to you.” She pauses, one eyebrow arching. “If it’s ok with you, that is.”

Mike lets out an almost breathless laugh. “That’s always ok,” he says and the warmth of his words washes over her in a way that almost makes El swoon. He tenses, though, fingers of one hand plucking nervously at the strap of his backpack, and he glances down to stare intently at the toes of his shoes. Before El can ask what’s wrong, he sucks in a deep breath and looks back up at her. “Hey, um, El?”
There’s something in Mike’s voice that causes her breath to hitch in her chest, a breathless hope that tugs at her very soul. “Yeah?” she asks, stepping forward just enough to pull the door partially closed behind her so as to give them as much privacy as possible.

It’s like Mike’s harnessing every inch of courage he has to look at her, to not look away, and her heart goes out to him as he gulps. “About what you mentioned earlier – about Homecoming, I mean….”

_Oh god, is this it? Is he actually going to ask me?_ El smiles and takes another half step closer. “What about it?” she says, just barely above a whisper.

Mike stares at her for what feels like an eternity, gaze boring down into her, eyes searching for something and El desperately wants to give him whatever it is. It’s only anticipation of what Mike’s has to say that keeps her rooted to the spot. Otherwise, there’d be no stopping her from lunging forward and pulling him down so she could kiss him. Because he’s close enough to and every inch of El’s being _craves_ to know what would feel like to kiss him.

But, then, he looks away, whatever bravery that held him in place that long running out, and it’s like the wind goes out of his sails. “Nothing, um… never mind. Just….” He trails off, sighing. “I hope the right person asks you to Homecoming, is all, I guess.”

_He almost did_, El thinks, a little disappointed that he didn’t. But she smiles up at him anyway, getting a sense of just how much it took for Mike to get this close to asking her. “Yeah, me too,” El says, voice still quiet – any louder would destroy the hushed intimacy that surrounds them and El wouldn’t ruin that for the world.

“Well, I should….” Mike gestures behind him with a pointed thumb, fingers loosely curled in a fist, but he keeps his eyes on her the entire time, like he can’t look away.

“Yeah, you should,” El says. She reaches for him, hand squeezing his upper arm, touch lingering for maybe a second too long so she can enjoy the feel of him beneath her palm. “Talk to you later?”

At this, Mike smiles as he takes a step back, breaking the connection between them. “Yes, later. Later sounds good.” He gives her a little wave, smile turning almost shy, before he turns and heads down the porch steps.

El watches him for a couple of seconds, eyes eagerly drinking in every detail about him – the span of his shoulders, the smooth and easy way he reaches into his pocket for his keys, the lazy grace of his gait – before she turns and heads back inside. A sigh escapes her as she shuts the front door, fingers groping for the deadbolt to lock it behind her.

Her veins buzz with a strange combination of disappointment and yearning, hope weaving back and forth between them to tug violently on her heart. God, she just… she feels _so much_, it’s well beyond overwhelming and El desperately craves for something to break. She feels like, every day, she and Mike are _that much closer_ to something wonderful and she can’t _wait_ to see what it’s going to be like when they get there.

_Just have to wait a little bit longer_, she thinks with a bittersweet smile. She gives herself a mental shake – nothing she can really do about it now – and heads off to where her dad’s sitting on the couch, still deciding between the cable options for something to watch on TV.

Hopper looks over at her as El enters the family room. One eyebrow is raised in question, brow folding above it, and a soft grin pierces through the greying dark blond of his goatee. “Mike go home already, eh?” he says, not looking away as El comes over and plops down on the couch next to him.
“Yeah, we’re going to meet up again to study on Thursday,” El says as she leans against her dad, head pillowed on his shoulder.

“Hmm, well, he seems nice. Little quiet, though,” Hopper says, sniffing a little as he goes back to scrolling through the cable menu.

“That’s because you scare him,” El says. “He’s a great talker once you get to know him.”

“Oh?” There’s a curiously knowing edge to Hop’s voice and El knows the jig is up. “So you’ve gotten to know him, huh?”

El breathes out a laugh. “Yeah, well….” She trails off, wrapping her hands around her dad’s arm as she cuddles up against him. “I’m hoping he’ll ask me to Homecoming.”

“Ha, knew it,” Hopper says, voice quiet but with the unmistakable tone of victory. “Is he going to ask you, do you think?”

El shrugs as best she can where she’s curled up against Hop, but she can’t stop smiling. “I think he almost did tonight. And, if not, I’ll ask him instead.”

A low laugh rumbles against her ear and El finds herself smiling – for all she and Hop tease and troll each other, she loves him more than words can say. “That’s my girl,” he says, proud and supportive like a dad should be.

And she thinks – not for the first time, but never as strongly as right now – that things are finally, finally going right.

It’s official: Mike has no idea what’s going on and even less of a clue for what to do about it. He switches between emotions in the blink of an eye and it’s making him dizzy and frustrated, which only piles onto everything that he’s feeling.

One second, he’s confused and unsure, trying to figure out what El’s getting at by talking to him about Homecoming. The next, he’s panicking because oh god, does she expect him to ask her? That is what she was getting at, right? Then, at some point while that’s happening, hope will flare bright in his chest, making him feel lighter than air because, yes, he’s almost positive that because she expects him to ask her to Homecoming, she wants him to ask her….

Which triggers a fresh round of fear and disappointment in himself because, god, he is so not equipped to handle asking out a pretty girl. Especially not one as pretty as El.

Exhibit A of that is what happened on the Hoppers’ porch not 5 minutes ago where he’d just about screwed up the courage to ask El if she would go to Homecoming with him – despite the fact that he’s not even really sure if he wants to go, but if she wants to go, well then, hell, he’ll do just about anything to get her there – and then backed out at the last fucking minute because he’s such a fucking coward.

Mike throws his head back against the headrest and lets out a groan that’s almost more of a whine. How has he ended up here?

God, he has no idea what to do. Does El really want him to ask her to Homecoming? If so, why? What reason could she really have for wanting to go with him to a school dance? And how can she
expect him to ask her if he can’t even figure any of this out?

But this is a good thing, right? That she wants him to ask her? Means she might actually really like him, that he hasn’t been imagining any of this. And, god, he wants to go out with her – scratch that, he wants more than that – he wants it all, whatever she’ll give him..

But how’s he supposed to get any of it when he slinks away from each opening she gives him like a dog with its tail between its legs? Mike’s never been any good with girls, like, at all. Seriously, given his track record, this is doomed to end in failure even before he starts.

Which brings him right back around to, oh god, he has no idea what to do.

Round and round these thoughts go in his head, whipping around in a lightning-fast loop and crackling along every neuron in his brain. It’s enough to make him want to tear his hair out and, honest to fucking god, the only thing keeping him from doing that is the fact that he’s currently driving and has both hands on the wheel because he’s a good driver, dammit.

When Mike gets home only 10 minutes after leaving El’s house, he feels like he’s been put through the wringer. All he wants to do is go up to his room and collapse into bed. But he still has homework to do in the classes he doesn’t share with El, so sleep is still a couple hours away. First, though, he heads into the kitchen to grab something to drink.

His mom is in the kitchen, sipping at the last of her glass of wine while she reads something on her phone, bathrobe wrapped securely over her pajamas and she looks up as Mike crosses over to the fridge to grab a bottle of water. “Hey, how was studying with El?” she asks, voice hushed, keeping with the quiet, sleepy mood that comes over the rest of the house once Holly goes to bed.

“Good, got a lot of work done,” Mike says and he can’t keep his exhaustion from seeping into his words, so he doesn’t try to hide it. “I’m pretty tired, though, and I have a little more work left to do before I go to bed.”

Mike looks over at his mom in time to see her smiling at him, the expression soft and fond. “Those classes of yours, always assigning so much work,” she says with a shake of her head.

“Tell me about it,” he says with a roll of his eyes. “Well, g’night, Mom.” Mike turns to head back out of the kitchen and is almost out to the hallway when his mom calls after him.

“Sweetheart, is everything else alright?”

Mike pauses and turns just enough to look at his mom over his shoulder. “Yeah, Mom, I’m just tired, I promise,” he says, like a liar.

“Well, if you’re sure….” his mom says before she waves him off with a gentle hand. “Don’t work too hard, now. You need to make sure you get some sleep, too.”

“Will do,” Mike says with a small smile and he turns to finally head upstairs.

The sight of his full-sized bed has never looked more enticing, but Mike plops down onto his desk chair instead, resisting every urge to slump over the cluttered surface. He knows the second his head so much as hits a horizontal surface, that’ll be it for him, so he doesn’t dare give in now, not when he still has homework left.

Something seems to finally go his way for once and it doesn’t take him more than an hour to finish up both his work for Spanish and for his own English class. But that does mean he’s in the process of crawling into bed by the time El calls him like she said she would.
For a moment, Mike almost decides not to answer. He stares down at the screen of his phone, covers pulled up to his waist as he sits up near his pillows. He isn’t sure if he has the emotional energy to handle talking to El right now given the whole roller coaster of emotions he experienced in the car on the way home. How’s he supposed to act like nothing’s wrong and keep from exposing himself as the worst kind of loser when he’s this fucking tired?

But, Mike knows he’d never leave El’s call unanswered. After all, he promised he’d help her, even if he didn’t use those exact words, and Mike’s not about to back out of a commitment now. So, he slides his finger across the screen to answer the call and presses his phone to his ear. “Hi, El,” he says.

“Hey, Mike,” is her almost breathless response. “Sorry, I wanted to call you earlier, but I was hanging out with my dad for a little bit after you left and didn’t get back to homework until, like, a half an hour ago.”

It’s weird – for all of Mike’s angst and exhaustion and overwhelming emotion, almost all of it caused by the girl on the other end of the call, the sound of El’s voice with its gentle sweetness immediately sets him at ease and Mike sighs as he leans back against the pillows. “It’s ok, it’s not too late or anything,” he says.

Thankfully, he manages not to sound like a total idiot or anything, giving away nothing of the turmoil raging inside of him. It’s easier to talk to her like this, when he’s in bed and snuggled beneath the covers. He just feels a little braver, like his anxiety can’t touch him here. “Did you need help with your English assignment or did you just want to talk?”

There’s the slightest pause from the other end of the line before El breathes out a soft giggle. Mike doesn’t know how his heart doesn’t explode at the sound. “Can’t it be both?”

Oh god, how does she always manage to make him feel like this, like he’s inches away from untethering from gravity’s hold entirely? She must have superpowers, I swear…. “Both is good, both is totally good,” Mike says with a low laugh of his own. “Let’s get the homework part out of the way first, though. How’s that going?”

El starts guiding him through her thought process for her assignment on “The Grapes of Wrath” (which he read last year and absolutely hated) and Mike finds that his anxiety and fear and all of the emotions that are just Too Much fade away from the sound of her voice. All he’s left with is the soft, thrilling warmth of what he feels for El, normally tucked safely into the protected corners of his heart, now reaching out to slip through his veins and infuse him with happiness. It’s still too much, but it’s the good kind, the kind he wants to live in forever.

By the time El’s finished getting reassurance that what she’s done for her English assignment isn’t complete garbage, their conversation slides over to anything but school – Mike whining that Will isn’t finished with the second Dresden Files novel yet, annoyed to the point where he’s thisclose to buying his own damn copy; Mike giving her his own book recommendations; the two of them talking about what Netflix shows they want to watch.

They do not talk about the Homecoming dance, however. Which is good because any time Mike’s thoughts get anywhere close to that perilous topic, his breath threatens to seize up in his lungs, chest growing tight – just from the mere thought. But all he has to do is focus back on her voice again and, suddenly, he can breathe again.

Despite how El’s voice seems to distract him from his thoughts and keep those negative emotions at bay, he knows he can’t talk to her all night – they do have to go to bed at some point. So, after they hang up for the night with promises of seeing each other in class the next day, all it takes is the lack
of her voice in Mike’s ear for all his doubt and confusion and frustration to come roaring back in. His mind races, thoughts stuck in a depressed, disappointed loop as he tries and fails to fall asleep in a timely manner. He can’t stop thinking about El and the dance and what all of it means, gaze firmly fixed on the ceiling above him.

Ultimately, the conclusion he comes to is this: he’s almost 100% sure that El wants him to ask her to go to Homecoming (or, at least, he’s sure that’s what she wants him to think), which means that he’s almost 100% sure she likes him – *likes* likes him. But here’s the problem: he’s a) not totally sure, and Mike has learned not to take any risks with his heart under any circumstances because b) he’s a giant chickenshit. After all, he completely wussed out on asking El to the dance earlier and no amount of wishful thinking is suddenly going to make him any braver the next time he gets a chance… *if* there’s a next chance.

To make matters worse, Mike’s *still* a little freaked out by what happened between him and Zach last week in the locker room and it’s almost a guarantee Zach will do something to make Mike’s life a living hell if Mike and El appear to do anything someone could consider romantic. And, again, Mike’s a chickenshit – he’s spent his whole life figuring out ways to avoid being in the pathway of bullies, not drawing their attention to him with a spotlight.

So, yeah, El wants Mike to ask her to the dance and Mike’s too much of a coward to do it for all the reasons listed above and, *oh god*, this is what heartburn feels like, doesn’t it? It’s like his insides are searing themselves under the pressure of the feelings he can’t suppress and, when he finally does manage to fall asleep, it’s restless and he spends most of the night tossing and turning.

The dawning of a new day does little to ease any of Mike’s angst and anxiety and he only feels worse and worse as the morning goes on. Not even seeing El in Trig, seeing her smile and listening to her giggle as they talk, does much to lift his spirits.

Then lunch happens and, somehow, it gets *worse*.

El’s sitting with Stacey and the rest of the popular clique today, right smack dab in the middle of the cafeteria. Naturally, Mike can’t take his eyes off of her from where he and the Party are sitting at a table along one of the walls, feeling like he’s on the outside looking in. It’s noisy in the cafeteria, but as Mike watches El laugh at something Jennifer Hayes says, he *swears* he can hear her, even at this distance, even through all the noise. The joyful lilt of her laugh has quickly become one of Mike’s favorite sounds in the entire world and he wishes he was a little closer so he could hear it instead of imagining it.

But it doesn’t take long for him be thankful for the distance between his table and the one El’s sitting at because what he’s about to witness is enough to make him wanna be sick even *without* the audio.

At first, he’s not sure what’s happening and he almost laughs as a kid wearing what looks like a rented troubadour costume and holding a classical guitar makes his way through the cafeteria. But the laughter dies when Mike sees Zach Mercer a couple of steps ahead of troubadour kid, moving through the crowds that part around him with ease, dressed nicely in slacks and a button down shirt, red rose in one hand.

Mike’s a smart guy, on track to possibly be considered for Valedictorian, and it only takes him about half a second to put the pieces together with sickening clarity, to follow the likely line of Zach’s path to it’s horrible and nauseating destination.

And, when Zach approaches the table that El’s sitting at, Mike *knows* he was right.

Zach’s going to ask El to Homecoming in front of the *entire* school.
A hush comes over the cafeteria at the sight, but there’s enough murmuring to mask the audio what’s happening and Mike’s glad for it. Because if he had to hear as well as see Zach get down on one knee, troubadour kid playing on his guitar behind him, and ask El to go out with him in front of the entire school, Mike knows he would have lost his lunch right then and there.

Honestly, the visual’s bad enough and the eager whispers roiling through the student body aren’t helping any. Mike never realized just how invested everyone is in any gossip surrounding El and who she dates and the thought of getting caught up in that is just as sickening as the sight in front of him.

But that’s all in the back of his mind as he watches Zach wrap up whatever romantic speech he’s prepared. The look on Zach’s face is the fake kind of wholesome only idiots can’t see through and he paints on a winning smile as he holds out the rose in one hand, waiting for El’s response. The looks on the popular girls’ faces as they watch this happen are simpering and giddy, and Mike can just hear the way they’re sighing with longing, melting as they hope that someone would do something this romantic for them.

God, Mike hates him. He hates that guys like Zach can do shit like this and have girls falling all over them. And Mike especially hates how he could never pull something like this off in a million years.

Despite how everyone else around her is reacting, El looks distinctly unamused. Hell, Mike doesn’t even think he’s ever seen her so locked down, her expression flat and hard, and Mike knows is he never wants El to look at him that way ever.

If Mike hadn’t gotten to know El at least a little over the past few weeks, he’d scared that El might say yes to whatever Zach’s asking her (because, he can admit it, it’s objectively romantic as hell what Zach’s doing). But, looking at her now, he knows there’s no way she’s going to say yes and shameful relief pours through him that he’s not going to have to see that. He knows he’s the worst kind of person since he doesn’t have the bravery to actually ask El out himself, but he also really doesn’t want to feel the pain of seeing El with someone else. He’s not sure how long his luck will hold out there, but at least for today, he’s spared that particular pain.

It feels like the entire cafeteria is waiting with bated breath for El’s response. And, despite being pretty sure about how this is all going to shake out, Mike finds himself getting wrapped up in the torturous anticipation as well, waiting for it to break, hoping it does so soon.

It does, maybe half a second later and shock ripples through the student body at El’s response. She gets up, half eaten lunch still firmly on the table, looks down at Zach for one long, heavy moment, and just walks away, shaking her head the entire time. Zach’s still kneeling there, though, rose still in hand, and he’s looking a little shell-shocked at what just happened, like he suddenly can’t understand reality.

Mike follows El’s form as she cuts through the crowds all still staring at her, leaving murmurs in her wake. God, he can see tense lines of her shoulders and the almost frantic clip of her steps speaks to her need to get out of there as soon as possible.

Mike’s not sure exactly what happens with Zach as his gaze is firmly focused on where El exited the cafeteria, but he can hear the sounds of everyone talking about what just happened.

And, for the second time in less than 24 hours, a soul-crushing realization falls down on top of him, slamming into him and making him feel like he can’t breathe.
El is beautiful and popular; she shines brighter than anyone in this school, always has a kind word for her friends, and is one of the smartest people he knows. She deserves the world – hell, she deserves everything. And even though Zach doesn’t seem to have a snowball’s chance in hell at being with El (especially given the way she just very publicly rejected him), that shit he just pulled? Wooing her in public like that, declaring for everyone to see that he’s interested in her romantically? That’s the kind of stuff El deserves. She deserves a guy who’s not afraid to go after what he wants – she deserves a guy who will pull out all the stops to make her feel like the most amazing woman in the world.

Which means El deserves better than someone who doesn’t even have the tiniest amount of courage to admit what he really wants in private to the girl he likes, much less public… better than someone who’s too afraid of taking any kind of risk, of being judged for daring to want to be with someone so beautiful and effervescent.

El deserves better than anything Mike can offer her.

Worse, Mike knows he doesn’t deserve her, doesn’t come anywhere close. He’s not brave or charming or particularly handsome. How she can look at him and see someone worth being interested in, someone she wants to have ask her out, is anyone’s guess. And, even if they did end up together, he knows he’d just fuck it all up or El would eventually realize that she can do so much better and leave him behind in the dust like he deserves, heart-broken and devastated.

The realization burns through his stomach, sour and bitter, and what little appetite Mike had for the school-provided lunch completely vanishes. The world around him fades to a dull roar, vision going a little grey around the edges, and not even the rest of the Party’s effort to pull him into talking about what happened as a way to make fun of Zach can pull him out from under the cloud that’s threatening to take permanent residence above his head.

Mike ends up leaving lunch a few minutes early so he can beat the rush to class, needing to get away from everyone just for a couple of minutes. He doesn’t feel up to pushing his way through throngs of people, not when he feels like he’s one more bad moment away from crawling into a hole and staying there for the rest of his life.

He walks into the US History and almost does a double take at the sight of El already sitting at her desk, head pillowed on her arms like she can block out the rest of the world. So this is where she disappeared off to after storming away.

There’s no one else in the classroom at the moment – Ms. Palecki is probably on her way back from lunch herself, Mike reasons – and he takes a deep, steadying breath before pushing further into the classroom.

It’s obvious that El isn’t in the greatest mood, either, and he’s determined not to add to it by having his own emotional torment painted all over his face. Just because he thinks he doesn’t deserve her and can never be what she wants him to be doesn’t mean he doesn’t want to be her friend, doesn’t mean he still doesn’t want to be more than friends.

So, he schools his face into the calmest, most casual expression he can summon and strides forward.

“Hey,” he says quietly once he’s close enough. He’s hoping El will raise her head and look at him so he can know what to say, but she doesn’t and he doesn’t know what to do.

“Ugh, please tell me people weren’t still talking about what happened when you left the cafeteria,” comes El’s muffled response.
At that, Mike breathes out a humorless laugh as he sits down at his desk. “Guess I have disappointing news for you, then.”

El lets out a tortured groan and she rotates her head so she can look at him without lifting her head up. “I hate everyone,” she says in the smallest, most pitiful voice he’s ever heard. Her full lips pull down in a pout and the sight of her lower lip sticking out like that makes him want to kiss her and explore just how soft and full it is.

The over-the-top melodrama of it all makes Mike laugh despite himself and, for the moment, he can pretend like he’s not slowly dying inside. “Ok, now that’s not true.”

El looks at him, eyes wide, lashes fluttering as she blinks quickly, like she’s only really looking at him for the first time. She sighs and sits up from her slump. “Yeah, you’re right, it’s not true. I just hate Zach.”

“Yeah, I could tell you weren’t a fan,” Mike says. His fingers are starting to tremble, nervousness invading him as they continue talking about this. He doesn’t want to talk about Zach’s failed attempt at asking El out. But it’s clear it’s bothering El and he doesn’t want to cut her off if she still wants to talk about this.

“Wasn’t a fan of the other times, either,” El grumbles. “Honestly, if he just disappeared off the face of the planet, I wouldn’t be sad at all. He’s such a douchecanoe.”

He doesn’t know why it hits him like a punch to the gut that Zach’s tried multiple times to ask her out, but Mike finds himself almost struggling to breathe. “Wow, sounds like the guy can’t take a hint.”

“No, he can’t,” El says before she sighs again and looks over at him. “Sorry, I’m sure this is the last thing you want to talk about. It’s the last thing I want to talk about, really.”

Mike shrugs, offering El a small smile. “It’s ok – it looked pretty traumatic from where I was sitting, so I can only imagine it was worse up close.”

El lets out an almost manic laugh. “Oh god, it was horrible,” she groans. “Like, if I could scrub that from my brain forever, I totally would. Needless to say, he’s the last person I want asking me to anything, never mind Homecoming.”

El’s words remind Mike that he almost asked her to Homecoming last night (and would have if he hadn’t chickened out) and Mike squirms in his seat a little at the discomfort that ripples through him. She must sense something is off with him because she shakes her head a few moments later, like she’s trying to get rid of the topic entirely. “So, yeah, that happened and now I have to live with everyone gossiping about me behind my back like my life’s some sort of amusement for them.”

Mike smiles at her. “Well, you won’t have to worry about me doing that.”

El returns the smile and it makes Mike feel all warm and fluttery inside. “That’s because you’re such a good friend, Mike. I’m lucky to have you,” she says, voice dipping low and almost intimate. God, she could ask him to do anything in that tone of voice and he knows he’d almost immediately and always say yes.

Thankfully, the moment passes and they move on to talking about something else – namely about what’s coming up in their classes. But Mike can feel that something’s shifted between them. Or at least it has for him. He can feel it like the elephant in the room no one ever wants to acknowledge: that, despite how much Mike likes El and how much he’s pretty sure she likes him, he’ll never
deserve her and being with her would be a recipe for failure on so many levels.

Besides, it won’t take her long to find out you’re not worth it, the insidious voice of self-doubt whispers in the back of his head. It taunts him as he goes about the rest of his day, piling on to the rest of what he’s feeling. You’re nothing compared to her and she’ll find that out sooner or later. Might as well cut your losses now. She’ll move on soon enough and be happier for it when you do.

To make this even more complicated, El doesn’t seem to know any of this is happening. She still looks at him with her bright smiles and affectionate eyes, still gives him flirty winks and soft giggles, still gives him almost heavy-handed hints that she’d like to be with him and making it oh so clear that she more than likes his company. It’s like nothing has changed for El, like she’s totally unaware that the fundamentals have drastically shifted beneath Mike’s feet over the past 24 hours.

Mike’s not sure if he should be encouraged she’s still openly interested in him or concerned that she hasn’t noticed his angst over this (or, worse, that she doesn’t care). Overall, he’s just confused and sad and he has no idea what to do. It doesn’t make him mad or prickly or anything, which is his usual response when shit happens to him that he can’t control – it just makes him tired.

But, as is seemingly always the case, no matter how contradictory it might be, the one thing that helps is being around El. It’s like he can forget everything bad about his life as long as he’s near her, or at least he can ignore it. Her presence helps clear out the cobwebs her absence creates and it gives him the energy he needs to try and act as normal as possible.

(Which may be why El hasn’t noticed he’s been having an existential crisis for the past couple of days, but, y’know, understanding that requires logic that is beyond Mike’s teenage angst-ridden mind right at this exact moment.)

The thing is, though, Mike knows this is all going to come to a head and that he won’t be ready for it when it does. Homecoming is only a couple of weeks away and it’s obviously something El’s interested in – so it’s just a matter of time before he’s going to be backed into a corner and forced to figure out what to do when he is.

Mike manages to keep all of this inside of him, however, as the next couple of days passes. He sits in class with El, talks to her in the hallways, and manages to focus on working with her at his house Thursday after school, all without making a total and complete fool of himself.

That all changes, however, when he drops El off at home Thursday night.

The ride over to her house is quiet except for the low hum of the radio. It’s mostly peaceful, but Mike can still feel the lingering awkwardness like a third passenger lurking in the back seat. It makes him feel tense, neck and shoulders tight and itchy, and feeling fights against the happy thrill of just being in El’s presence. It’s strange, to say the least.

But, as far as Mike can tell, El’s not at all bothered or out of sorts at all. She’s pretty talkative for the first couple minutes of the ride, but as he drives them through town and down Main Street, she goes quiet, content with staring out the window and watching the scenery go by.

El looks so relaxed and secure in this moment – secure in who she is, in what she wants, in everything. Mike envies that about her and wishes he had an ounce of her confidence. He finds himself stealing glances at her almost constantly on the ride home, marveling at her presence and wishing he could know what is going on in her head.

And then, before he knows it, he’s pulling up into her driveway, parking a few feet behind Hopper’s car so El can get out. “Well, guess this is your stop,” Mike says, just loud enough to be heard over
the song playing low in the background.

“Yeah, guess it is,” El says as she pulls her backpack into her lap. She pauses, taking a deep breath, before she looks over at him, a question in her gaze. “Hey, um, I wanted to ask you something.”

It’s a testament to how topsy turvy Mike’s been feeling the past couple of days that he doesn’t immediately suspect anything at all. Instead, he looks at her, brow furrowing as his eyebrows raise just slightly. “Um, yeah, sure. What is it?” One of his hands is perched on the wheel, but the other falls to his thigh, palm rubbing against the denim of his jeans.

El smiles at him and the sight of it, shadowed as it is by the dim light of evening, is so beautiful that Mike practically falls for her all over again. “I’ve just been thinking a lot over the past couple of days, especially after what happened yesterday, and well….” She trails off, one shoulder lifting in a cute, almost flirty shrug. “I’ve decided to just cut to the chase.”

Ok, now Mike’s really confused. “Cut to the chase?” he repeats like if he echoes her words back at her, it’ll help him understand what she’s getting at.

El giggles, nose scrunching up adorably. “Yeah. I was trying to see if you were going to ask, but patience isn’t exactly my strong suit.”

Understanding is beginning to dawn on Mike, leaving him feeling frozen, numb, as it spreads down the back of his neck and across his skin. “Ask me what?”

“If you wanted to go to Homecoming with me,” El says, smile growing that much wider, gaze sparkingly gentle as she looks at him across the confines of the car. “I think it’d be fun, you and me. And, really, there’s no one I’d rather go with than you, so….” Her smile turns into a grin. “Whaddya say? Wanna be my date?”

His heart, which had just about stopped in the lead up to El’s ask, begins beating in triple time, thumping heavy against his ribcage and making him feel dizzy. Did she just… did she really… oh my god, I... really? Holy. Shit.

Mike can’t believe it – he honestly can’t. El Hopper, the most beautiful girl he’s ever seen in his entire life, who’s nice and sweet and funny and just about perfect, has asked him, Nerd Extraordinaire, to Homecoming.

God, is this really happening?

Of all the ways Mike saw this playing out, this was not one of them. Never in a million years would he have guessed that El would just ask him herself. But, really, in the back of his head, in the only corner of his mind able to process anything other than huh, he has to admit it makes perfect sense. El is headstrong and assertive, confident in what she wants and in her ability to achieve her goals – she’s not afraid, push come shove, to take the kinds of risks Mike has never been able to take.

And she wants him.

…Well, as her date to Homecoming, at least. Which is still… wow.

God, Mike can practically picture it: him picking her up to take her to the dance, El wearing a beautiful dress that makes her look even more gorgeous and ethereal than usual, hair and makeup absolutely perfect; her smiling up at him as they head out for the evening, maybe grabbing dinner beforehand; the two of them dancing, the whole world ceasing to matter as he holds her in his arms….
…everyone staring at them, laughing and mocking, wondering why a girl like El is lowering herself to be with someone like him; Zach staring at them, murder writ large in his gaze; El deciding that, hey, maybe this isn’t really worth it because she didn’t sign up to be laughed at by the entire school; Mike making a fool of himself by stepping on her toes or tripping in front of the whole school; Ashley coming out of the woodwork and taking El aside, “Let me tell you something about loser Mike Wheeler….”

God, he can’t do this. He just… there’s so much that can go wrong and Mike knows he’s not strong enough to handle when all of it does because his luck is just that shitty and….

Why does El have to be looking at him like this, her gaze soft and gentle, expression the epitome of patiently hopeful? It makes him want to give her everything because she’s so beautiful and so nice, just the nicest person he’s ever met. And he’s such a loser, unable to get over himself long enough to grab at what’s being handed to him on a silver platter.

“Oh, I—” Mike sucks in a deep breath, brain short-circuiting under the intensity of her regard – he just cannot handle the way she’s looking at him right now and it’s turning him into a bumbling idiot. “El, I’m – thank you, but I just – I don’t think it’s a good idea. I mean, I don’t—” He gestures helplessly in the space between them, hand going back and forth, as the words get stuck in his throat.

It takes maybe a second for the look on El’s face to go from hopeful to embarrassed, her eyes going wide as her mouth drop open. “Oh – oh god, wow, I’m….” El closes her eyes for a split second, giving herself a shake, and when she opens her eyes back up, there’s something in her gaze that tugs at his heartstrings, but it’s gone before he can identify what it is, fading away as she smiles at him just as gently as before. “God, I’m sorry. I totally misread… wow, I’ve made this really uncomfortable for both of us, haven’t I?”


El holds up a hand, smile a little dimmer than just a moment ago, but still ever-present. “Hey, no, it’s ok. No big deal. I get it now. I’ll just… I’ll see you tomorrow, yeah?” She unbuckles her seatbelt and opens the door. Mike can only stare at her like an idiot, trying to understand what in the fuck is happening right now.

El starts to slide out of the car, but pauses perched on the edge of the seat and turns to look at him over her shoulder. “We’re still friends, just so you know. No matter what, I don’t want that to change.”

Mike’s stomach turns and he’s not exactly sure why. Something has gone very wrong in the last 30 seconds and he’s not sure what. “I… um, yeah, of course,” he hears himself say over the roaring that’s starting to fill his ears from the way his heartbeat pounds loudly inside his head.

El smiles and there it is, again, that flash of something in her gaze that makes Mike unbearably sad even though he’s not sure what it is. “Good, I’m glad. Bye, Mike. See you in class tomorrow.” She gives him a small wave, nothing more than a quick trill of her fingers, and then she’s out of the car. The door shuts easily behind her and Mike watches as she walks around the car and up to her front door. Her head’s held high, steps smooth and easy, like everything’s fine and normal, like what just occurred between them in the car was just part of everyday life, or something.

But, if that’s the case, then why does Mike feel like everything’s just become horribly fucked up? Yeah, sure he’s a fucking idiot for turning El down, but that’s more his problem than hers. It’s not her fault he’s a coward who can’t be what she needs – really, he’s just saving her from wasting her time. Besides, El doesn’t seem all that broken-hearted about it – embarrassed and a little disappointed, maybe, but not devastated. At least, as far as he can tell. In fact, she doesn’t seem that
affected by his turning her down at all, so maybe he’s been misreading how she feels about him. Maybe she just likes flirting with him and hanging out with him without it turning into more. If she really liked him, she’d have been more upset, right?

So why does he feel like he’s missing something? Something big?

He wracks his brain for an answer as he drives home, trying to put the pieces together into something that makes sense….

But the answer remains stubbornly out of reach.

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El’s proud of herself, more than words can say.

She manages to maintain a straight face as she walks from Mike’s car and in through the front door, head held high the whole, cool and collected, like nothing’s wrong….

…Like she isn’t devasatingly heart-broken.

The façade she’s schooled her expression into is nothing more than a shallow veneer, thin flimsy as spun sugar. It crumbles the second she’s shut the front door behind her and she drops her backpack to the ground so she can fall back against the door.

El tilts her head back heavily, the upper curve of her skull thumping against the wooden surface with a dull thud, and tries desperately not to cry. But her vision mists over anyway, eyes burning hot with unshed tears, and her lower lips begins to quiver.

She’s not going to cry – she’s not. This isn’t the end of the world. This is just about a boy. A beautiful, marvelous, amazing boy, but a boy nonetheless. There are so many other things worth crying over than this.

But, god, it just hurts so much.

She thought – really, really thought – that there was something going on between her and Mike. She felt it – feels it still, actually. The fluttering in her heart when she sees him, the way his smile makes her stomach swoop and leaves her feeling all tingly, the way he laughs when she says something funny and his whole face lights up….

The way Mike makes her feel like she’s the most amazing person on the face of the planet.

The way she’s still falling in love with him.

And he doesn’t feel the same way about her.

El closes her eyes, a couple of tears escaping from beneath her closed lids, as she remembers that soul-crushing moment in the car when he turned her down.

(that moment of breathless anticipation as she waits for his response, marveling at how the shock written all over his face emphasizes the lines of his jaw and cheekbones as his mouth dropped open, disbelief writ large in his gaze and el has never felt more hopeful. but then, he speaks, words tripping over each other as he tells her, voice kind but shy, that he doesn’t think it’s a good idea… doesn’t think they’re a good idea as he gestures back and forth in the space that separates them.)
embarrassment and shock and hurt hit her as she realizes what he’s saying, her heart shattering as
she struggles to keep a straight face....)

God, she sees it now and she really is the worst kind of idiot. Here she's been spending all this time
thinking that Mike liked her how she likes him when, in reality, he was just being friendly. She
thinks about all the times he’s been awkward and shy when she’s flirted with him and she sees it
with painfully crystal clarity: he wasn’t actually into it, he was just too nice to tell her to stop. And he
may have never told her if she hadn’t backed him into a corner when she asked him to Homecoming.

Well, at least he wasn’t mean about it when he turned you down. The bittersweet thought, whispered
in the back of her mind, is little consolation. Mike being nice does little to help her put the pieces of
her heart back together, does little to help make her feel like less of an idiot.

Part of her wants to whine and cry over how unfair it is, but El’s mature enough to know that Mike’s
under no obligation to like her back, no matter how much she likes him.

Still doesn’t make it hurt any less, still doesn’t mean she’s not sad and devastated right in this
moment. It’s just, she wanted so badly for it to be more than this, for her and Mike to be more than
friends, and it feels like a tragedy that it’s not going to be.

The urge to stay here, to sink down to the floor and wallow in this spot for the rest of the night is
strong. But El has work to do, even though she’s really not in the mood to do anything right now.

And then she hears the sounds of the TV coming from the family room and her heart twists painfully
in her chest. That’s right, her dad’s home. And, suddenly, El wants nothing more than to curl up
with her dad, to feel his strong presence next to her and have him tell her that everything’s going to
be alright.

El opens her eyes and lets out a shaky breath. One hand comes up to wipe away the few tears that
have fallen and she blinks furiously to clear the rest of them. She takes a moment to collect herself
(even though she doesn’t have to be strong for her dad, she’s still proud above everything else,
something she gets from him) before she pushes away from the door and heads to the family room,
heels dragging oh so slightly as she makes her way through the house.

“Hey hon, how was your study date?” Hopper asks before El steps into the family room, clearly able
to hear her footsteps before she comes into view.

The sound of the word date makes El’s heart do another one of those horrible, painful twists and she
swallows down the lump of tears that rises up in her throat. “Don’t wanna talk about it,” she says as
she rounds the corner into the family room.

Hop looks over at her entrance and it only takes him a second for him to notice that something is
wrong. A concerned frown works its way onto his face, his brow furrowing as he looks at her. “El?
Everything ok?”

El ducks her gaze as she makes her way over to the couch. Hopper’s sitting on one side of it, leaning
against the armrest, so there’s a full two cushions worth of space for her to flop down onto. She
pillows her head on Hop’s leg, blindly reaching out for one of the throw pillows so she can cradle it
close to her chest. “No, everything sucks.”

El can feel Hop tense behind her, like he’s not sure what to do exactly, like he’s scared that he’ll do
the wrong thing and make everything worse. “Did something happen? Did Mike do something to
make you upset?” A hard edge creeps into Hopper’s tone, protective father and Chief of Police all
rolled into one.
“Yes, but it was my fault,” El says. Her throat is tight, so the words come out a little above a croak, and she hugs the pillow tighter. “I, um, I asked him to Homecoming and he turned me down. Turns out he doesn’t actually like me like that.”

There’s a pause before Hop lets out a soft sigh and El feels his hand come down on her shoulder, giving her a gentle, comforting squeeze. “Oh, honey, I’m sorry. I know how much you liked him.”

Hearing her dad talk about her feeling for Mike as past tense, coupled with the soft, soothing sympathy in his voice, is enough to bring her tears back. El’s glad she’s not looking at Hop right now because she can just picture the sad, kind look on his face and if she had to actually see it for herself, she’d break down into sobs. “I feel like such an idiot,” she says, unable to keep the quaver out of her voice.

“Hey, no, you’re not the idiot. That kid is for not seeing how amazing you are,” Hop says, voice growing firmer, before he breathes out a low laugh. “Want me to go arrest him, give him a talking to? Sounds like he could use a little bit of the fear of God put into him.”

At that, El lets out a watery laugh, a few tears escaping to trail down her cheek and nose, and she lifts her hand to wipe them away. “No, Dad, don’t, please. That’s totally uncalled for.”

“Alright, if you say so,” Hop says and El can hear the shrug in his voice. “Let me know if you change your mind, though. It’ll give me an excuse to get back in the field.”

“I appreciate the offer,” El says, rolling her eyes despite herself. “But no thanks.” Still, for as ridiculous as the thought is, her dad arresting Mike because he turned her down, it makes her feel a little warm inside, knowing that no matter what, she always has her dad in her corner.

They both quiet down after that, conversation coming to an end as they focus on the TV where Hop’s tuned the channel to Thursday night football. El doesn’t really care who’s playing, but she tries to let the familiar sounds of football on TV distract her from the pain swirling inside her.

Eventually, El knows she’s going to have to go upstairs, get back to work, and start the process of moving on. But, right now, all she wants to do is stay down here with her dad while she wallows and lets herself be sad.

And, so, feeling safe and warm with her dad by her side, El lets herself mourn for what could have been.

If El’s hoping a good night’s sleep will make her feel better, she’s going to be sorely disappointed waking up on Friday morning.

Of course, that would have meant she actually got a good night’s sleep, which she didn’t.

She doesn’t cry herself to sleep or anything, but she can’t shut her brain off at all as she lays in bed, mind swirling with pity and self-recrimination.

So when she “wakes up” in the morning, full of murderous thoughts all directed at her phone’s alarm, she feels like she’s barely slept a wink.

It feels like she gets ready in a world filled with fog, like she’s a fraction of a second of a degree out of phase from everything else, but she somehow manages to drag herself downstairs to where
Hopper’s putting together something that resembles breakfast. The smell of coffee hits her, broadcasting out like an ambrosic beacon, and El’s mouth just waters at the thought of having some.

Hopper turns at the sound of El’s shuffled footsteps entering the kitchen and he gives her a small, sympathetic smile. “Morning, sweetheart,” he says. “You feeling ok?”

“Not really,” El says, grumbling, as she plops down in her usual chair at the kitchen table. “Didn’t sleep well.”

Hopper, to El’s eternal gratitude, brings her over a mug filled with coffee. “I know I don’t normally let you have brewed coffee, but you look like you could use it.” He also brings over a whole bunch of cream and sugar, setting it down next to the mug.

The simple action threatens to make El cry and she hates how exposed her emotions feel right now, like she’s just one big raw nerve. “Thank you,” she says in quiet, thick voice, swallowing heavily against the emotions that she feels like are about to overtake her entirely.

“You want some toast and cereal to go with that?” Hopper asks. His tone is overly cautious, like he’s afraid one wrong move will set her off and, well, El can’t say that he’s entirely wrong.

El pauses from where she’s dumping sugar from a packet into her coffee and glances over at her dad. “Nah, not hungry.”

There’s a long pause and El goes back to focusing on preparing her coffee. She wishes she had more energy, but she feels almost unbearably sad and it’s sapping what little energy she does have.

Hopper lets out a heavy sigh and El turns in time to see him sitting down next to her at the table. “Honey, did you want me to cancel tonight? If you’re not feeling up to it, I’m sure Joyce would understand.”

El blinks at him, confused, until memory rushes back, slamming into her like a freight train. God, that’s right: Joyce and Will are coming over for dinner later tonight. One of the highlights in her dad’s life has been these regular dinners with the Byers and El would hate to make him cancel something he looks forward so much to. But, Will is one of Mike’s best friends and Mike….

No, don’t do this. Don’t punish your dad because your love life didn’t turn out the way you wanted it to. All she has to do, she reckons, is make it through today. She needs to make it through spending half of her classes in the same room as the boy she’s in love with (who doesn’t love her back) and then an evening with one of his best friends. After that, she can hole herself up in her room and mope to her heart’s content and, maybe, after that, she’ll be fine… or, at least, she’ll feel better than she does right now.

Maybe she’ll be able to think about Mike without her heart feeling like it’s going to re-shatter into a million pieces.

But she just has to get through today. And that means dinner with Joyce and Will.

So, El smiles at Hop and shakes her head. “No, don’t cancel. I like it when Joyce and Will come over. Besides, I know how much you love having Joyce come over, so….” Her smile takes on a teasing edge and she has to admit, it helps more than she can say when Hopper starts spluttering, his face turning all sorts of alarming shades of red, and amusement sparks distractingly bright inside of her.

“Love? No one said anything about love. You’re clearly delusional. All those honors classes have rattled your brain or something….” Hopper pushes himself up and away from the table, going back
to whatever breakfast preparations he’s making, leaving El behind at the table, giggling at her father’s totally obvious ducking out of the way of his emotions.

But whatever happiness El gets from the moment is fleeting and temporary. By the time she’s in the passenger seat of Hopper’s cruiser, she’s back to feeling tired and sad, almost numb from the weight of both of them. She spends the entire ride to school staring out the window, gaze unfocused as the scenery goes by. She can feel her dad glancing at her every once in a while, concerned and like he’s unsure if he should be even driving her to school.

But, Hopper doesn’t say anything about El’s mood as he drops her off in front of the school, instead only reminding her that he’ll be waiting for her at the Station after she’s done for the day.

El’s not so far out of it that she doesn’t remember to press a quick kiss to Hopper’s cheek before she slides out of the car, which makes them both smile. But then El’s out in the open courtyard area and there’s nothing left to distract her from the fact that she needs to make it through almost an entire day of being in the same room with Mike and somehow not start crying while she’s at it.

You can do this, she tells herself as she draws in a deep, steadying breath. Conceal, don’t feel. That’s the name of the game.

The mental pep talk helps – yes, she can do this – and El heads inside outwardly cool as a cucumber, like she’s not suffering from a broken heart.

Still, just because she’s determined to not let anyone, especially Mike, know that she’s sad and hurt, that doesn’t mean that she doesn’t do what she can to minimize how much of a front she has to show.

Normally, El tries to time her bathroom breaks so she can go straight from her English class to Trig, just so she can have as much time as possible to talk with Mike before class. But, today, she ducks into the girls’ bathroom during the break between periods, stretching out her time there as long as possible. She makes it into Trig less than a minute before class starts and she can see Ms. Geno preparing to pass out their Trig test as she slides into her seat.

Mike’s already there and she can feel him looking at her while she sets her backpack down and reaches to pull out a pencil and her calculator. She knows she can’t ignore him, though, so El forces herself to look over at him after making sure that a friendly smile is pasted on her face. “Hey, morning. You ready?” Yes, that’s perfect – nice and casual and friendly – no flirting involved at all. And, best of all, no immediate sign of tears.

She can do this.

But, this still doesn’t stop El from giving Mike a discreet once over, her traitorous heart giving a fluttering, beat-skipping squeeze at the sight of him. How he manages to make jeans and a sweater look so good, she’ll never know, but it should be illegal for what it does to her heart.

El’s gaze finally lands on Mike’s face where she’s confronted with the sight of his soft, if slightly confused smile. There’s a penetrating look in his eyes that has her feeling a little bit like she’s under a microscope, but El very determinedly ignores the way the unease it inspires creeps down her spine.

“Yeah, well, we did study for this, so….” Mike says, trailing off. His brow furrows just slightly as his head tilts to one side. “Are you ok? You just–”

“I’m fine, just needed to stop by my locker before class,” El says, lying her ass off, and cutting Mike off before he can finish. She’s in no mood to hear why he’s concerned about her – not today and...
maybe not ever. That’ll depend on how she feels after the weekend’s over.

There’s no more time for talking as the bell rings and Ms. Geno starts passing out their tests and El’s never been more grateful for either of those things to start in her entire life.

The rest of the day goes on a lot like this: El with a friendliness that is a robust as a paper mache mask, gently evasive at all of Mike’s attempts to go more than surface level, and all of it covering a deep, soul-level weariness. She manages to project the “Everything is Normal” message as she and Mike walk from US History to Chemistry despite how much she wants to be as far away from him, but she knows if she ducks out of this routine, he’ll absolutely know something is wrong and that is the last thing she wants.

Once she’s on her way to Photography, Mike headed off to who-knows-where, El’s finally able to let out a sigh of relief. The hardest part of her day is over and she survived.

She finds the rest of the afternoon passes much easier when she doesn’t have to worry about putting on a good front for Mike and she’s left in peace to slink off to the police station once she’s out of school for the weekend. El knows she should do some of her homework while she waits for her dad to finish up his shift for the day, but she’s too tired, so she spends two hours playing on her phone – scrolling through her Instagram feed, watching random vids on Youtube, anything just to pass the time.

Eventually, finally, she and Hopper go home so they can start preparing to have Joyce and Will over for dinner. And, even though El’s already counting down the hours until she can crawl into bed, she’s kinda looking forward to having company over for dinner. Especially because she likes Joyce and Will (even though he comes with a painful reminder of Mike) and she’s been looking forward to having them over.

It’s a little before 6PM when the doorbell rings and El and Hopper are still prepping things for dinner: steaks and corn on the cob that Hop is going to grill in the backyard and a salad to go with it that El is going to toss right before everyone sits down so the lettuce doesn’t sit in the dressing for too long.

El pauses where she’s dumping chopped lettuce into a large bowl and looks over at her dad at the same time that he’s looking over at her. Hopper shrugs, probably in response to the question painted on El’s face. “Guess they’re early,” Hopper says, not looking at all bothered by the fact that Joyce and Will are a good 20 minutes early at least. “You mind getting the door?”

El takes one glance at where her dad’s standing by the counter and Seasoning the steaks, rubbing salt, pepper, and olive oil into the meat, and nods. “Yeah, I got it.”

El ambles on over to the front door and makes sure there’s a smile on her face before she greets their guests. “Hi guys, you made it!”

Joyce and Will are standing on the porch, Will a little behind his mom, and they both smile when they see her. “El, sweetie, hi!” Joyce says, eyes sparkling, skin around them crinkling at the corners from the force of her smile. That smile turns a little uncertain as she holds up both hands, revealing a bottle of red wine in one and a six pack of beer in the other. “Your dad told me to grab drinks for him and me for dinner, but I didn’t know what to grab, so….”

El breathes out a laugh, shaking her head a little. “I’m sure either will be fine with him,” she says as she steps aside to let Joyce and Will in. Her gaze slides past Joyce who’s just stepped over the threshold and over to Will who’s taking his sweet time. “Hey, Will.”
Will manages to give her a wave with both his hands stuffed in his jacket pockets, but he smiles at her nonetheless. “Hey, long time no see,” he says, snickering as he says it, more amused than anyone really should be at that dumb joke.

Still, El finds herself giggling even as she’s rolling her eyes. “Yes, because I didn’t just see you 3 hours ago.”

Will’s still laughing even after El shuts the door and she nudges him in the arm with her shoulder. “You nerd,” El says, voice teasing but with undeniable fondness.

“Hey, I have it on good authority that you like nerds,” Will says, grinning cheekily. “So there.”

El’s stomach turns as she’s reminded that, yes, she does like nerds (and one nerd in particular), and her smile dims. Will either doesn’t notice or decides not to say anything, for which El is grateful, and they follow Joyce into the kitchen without any commentary on the matter.

There’s another round of greetings once everyone’s in the kitchen and the alcohol dilemma is decided by Hopper deciding that he’s going to crack open one of the beers that Joyce brought and that she’s going to join him in enjoying one in the backyard while he grills the steaks and the corn, with the wine being saved for dinner.

This very soon leaves Will and El alone in the house and El looks over at him with a long-suffering sigh. “Wanna go hang in my room so we don’t have to watch them making eyes at each other?”

Will laughs, almost giggling. “I thought you thought it was cute, whatever’s going on with them,” he says with a vague hand-wavy gesture in the direction of the backyard.

El arches an eyebrow, hip popping as she rests her weight on one leg. “I do – doesn’t mean I wanna see my dad making goo goo eyes at your mom for longer than I have to.”

“You gotta admit, though,” Will says as they start heading upstairs. “It seems to make them pretty happy.”

“Yeah, it does,” El says, letting out a content sigh. “They just need to, y’know, actually go out on a real date. Not that I don’t like having dinner with you guys on a regular basis or anything, but come on. One of them has to make a move sooner or later.”

“I think you’re underestimating how chicken they are. And I don’t know about Hopper, but it’s been years since my mom was on anything close to a date.”

They enter her room and plop down on the bed, legs folding in front of them as they settle down facing each other. “Hmm, good point,” El says, knowing her dad’s also not the most daring when it comes to things like relationships.

Will starts taking off his jacket– makes sense since he’s going to be at her house for a while – but he pauses with the sleeves halfway down his arms and El notices something popping out from the inner pocket. “Oh yeah! I almost forgot.” Will reached in with one hand to grab the item while he shucks off his jacket the rest of the way. “I’m returning the second Dresden Files novel, hoping I can borrow the third one from you today.” He tosses his jacket aside, the item landing half off the edge of the bed, while he hands her book back to her with a mischievous grin. “Now you can go lend it to Mike. I’m sure he’ll be stoked to get this from you. Really, I think he’d prefer you to deliver this over me.”

The smile that had been building on her face at getting her book back fades at the mention of Mike’s name. “Oh, yeah,” she murmurs and she gingerly takes the book from Will, chest growing thick with sadness, her gaze dropping to the bedspread. “Thanks,” she says, but her heart’s not in it, squeezing
painfully just beneath her sternum and making her feel like she can’t breathe.

A heavy silence falls over the room and El can feel Will’s concern without even lifting her head to see how he’s looking at her. “El, is everything ok? Did, uh, did something happen with Mike?”

There’s something about the soft concern in Will’s voice that almost completely tears away all her defenses, something that is awkward and genuine at the same time – he obviously doesn’t feel comfortable with these kinds of emotions, but Will cares enough about El to try. El looks up at him and, almost immediately, the hot sting of tears pricks along the edges of her eyelids. “It’s stupid,” she says, trying to give him one last out. Will is one of Mike’s best friends – he’s not going to want to hear about how Mike rejected her and hurt her feelings.

Will looks at her for a long moment, considering, but he smiles after a beat, gentle and sympathetic, and reaches out to lay a hand on her forearm, just above her wrist, where it’s resting in her lap. “I wanna know anyway,” he says. “If it’s something Mike did, maybe I can help explain. I mean, I’ve known him since we were six – he’s practically my brother – and I know he can be moody sometimes.” Will pauses, one shoulder lazily shrugging. “Besides, it’s obvious this is bothering you. Usually any mention of Mike makes you giggle and blush like you’re a 7th grader with your first crush and I don’t like seeing you so sad.”

Well, she’s certainly not going to be able to get out without explaining now and, resigned to her fate, El sighs. She has to swallow down the thickness in her throat before she can speak and, when she does, the words come out small and quiet. “Yesterday, he was dropping me off at home after we studied at his house. And before I got out of the car, I asked him if he wanted to be my date to Homecoming.” She looks away as the hurt from yesterday comes rushing back in. “He turned me down.”

At that, Will gasps. “Wait, what?” The sharpness in Will’s voice startles El into raising her gaze so she can look Will in the eye. She blinks, taken aback by the shock written on his face, jaw dropped and eyes wide while he looks at her like she’s grown a second head. “You asked him to the dance and he said no? Like he actually turned you down.”

A bitter smile creeps onto El’s face, fighting against the quivering in her lower lip from trying to hold back her tears. “That’s exactly what happened.”

Will’s mouth works like he’s speaking, opening and closing, but no sound comes out for a couple of seconds. “But, I–” He shakes his head. “That doesn’t make any sense,” he all but whispers, giving himself a shake before he refocuses on her, gaze piercing. “What did he say? Did he say why?”

El gulps as she pulls her arms in so she can wrap them around her waist, hugging herself tightly. “Said he didn’t think it was a good idea. Said he didn’t like me like that.”

“What?” Will’s shoulders slump as the word escapes him in a hushed breath. “No, that’s not – El, no, he’s been obsessing over you for weeks. I probably shouldn’t be telling you this, but Mike is head over heels for you and—”

No, she can’t, she has to stop him. It hurts too much. She thought the same thing, thought that he liked her like she liked him. But El knows better now – after all, Mike told her himself. “No, he’s not. I was there, Will,” she says, biting out the words as she cuts Will off. “I heard what he said, ok? I appreciate you trying to make me feel better, but you’re wrong.” She’s holding herself so tightly, her fingers are digging into the fabric of her shirt. Her breathing’s gone ragged and her chest feels too tight.

The shock fades from Will’s face, leaving only pained sympathy in its place. She can still see the
confusion around the edges of his gaze, but that’s clearly not his focus right now and El’s heart twists at the gentleness in his expression. A couple of tears escape to trail down her cheeks and she draws in a shaky breath. “Oh, El,” Will breathes. “Do you want a hug?”

El can’t speak – she can only nod, not trusting able to trust her voice right in this moment. She and Will shift on the bed, getting closer so Will can reach out for her. El falls into the hug with a desperate sort of ease that’s almost surprising, but the way Will makes her feel safe enough to grieve makes her not care how needy she’s coming across right now. All she cares about is that Will’s hugging her and it feels nice to be held.

El wraps her arms around Will’s thin torso, face buried in his shoulder as she lets out a breathy sob. “I liked him so much, Will. And I thought he really liked me, too.” She sniffs, the sound wet with tears, and her eyes burn from the salty heat.

“I know, I did, too,” Will says. “It’ll be ok, though. I promise.”

In someways, that hurts even more to hear. El doesn’t want it to be ok. She wants Mike to like her back, she wants to go to the dance with him and go out on dates with him and be with him all the time.

She just wants and it’s not fair that she can’t have.

She’ll get over this someday, though – El knows she’s nothing if not resilient, especially with what happened after her mom left. She’ll mourn and accept how things are and how things can’t be. She’ll fold this hurt in with all the others and carry it with her for the rest of her days.

But right now? Right now it feels like someone is hollowing out her heart with a rusty spoon.

Right now she doesn’t have to be ok.

To say that the past week or so has been bad would be just about the biggest understatement in the history of anything ever.

Just getting threatened by the most popular jock in school for even being seen hanging out with someone Mike “shouldn’t be with” in the jock’s point of view and then seeing that same jock asking out the girl Mike’s been crushing on for the past several weeks in front of the whole school, throwing Mike’s inadequacies in his face while he’s at it, would be bad enough.

But, then, the girl Mike’s been crushing on, the literal girl of his dreams and just about the most amazingly perfect girl Mike’s ever had the privilege of getting to know, started hinting that she wanted him to ask her out before taking the initiative and asking him instead. Normally, this would be a dream come true scenario, but it threw Mike into such a panic that he turned her down like the fucking moron that he is (even though he’s still convinced, in the end, that he made the right call, much as that hurts him to think).

Needless to say, Mike was feeling fucking fantastic as he made his way home after turning El down. Just fucking stellar.

It’s no surprise when Mike comes to school on Friday beyond nervous. He’d left El, feeling confused and sad at her seemingly casual response to him turning her down, and he doesn’t know what he’s going to find when he sees her again. Is she going to be sad like him? Or is she going to be
fine, like Mike’s rejection is just a blip on her radar that she’s able to shrug off and go on with her life?

Mike doesn’t know which one of those options is worse and he finds himself almost vibrating with painful anticipation until he sees El again. She’s uncharacteristically late to Trig and Mike stares at as she ducks in at almost the last minute. He can’t help the way his eyes narrow as he watches her slide into her seat, greeting him in a rush. It’s like if he looks at her hard enough, he’ll be able to figure out what’s going on in her head. But El is almost unbearably friendly, if a little frazzled. It’s like last night never happened, like she’s totally and completely unaffected by his rejection of her.

*Like it never really mattered to her in the first place.*

It makes Mike wonder just how deep El’s attraction to him, if that’s what she felt, really was if she can just drop it and move on without a second thought and it *hurts* to think that it was maybe just a shallow thing after all.

But it gets worse. It takes him until the afternoon to realize that this also means that El’s no longer flirting with him and he finds himself painfully aware of this, missing it more than he can say. He misses the feeling of his heart racing and skipping, misses the swooping of his stomach and how every nerve lights up with pleasure and happiness. It’s the most noticeable reminder of what he’s given up and, god, he’s the worst kind of fool.

So, yeah, Mike’s upset – *really* upset. He’s confused and hurt about how El’s distanced herself, being merely friendly instead of warm and flirty to go with it; he’s mad at himself, so *fucking* mad, for being too scared to go after what he wants, even when it’s presented to him on a silver platter – *(seriously, el did all the actual hard work for him, asking him instead of waiting for him to ask her, and all he had to do was say yes and he couldn’t even do that.)*

And, most of all, Mike’s just sad – sad he can’t make himself be better, sad that this is the situation he’s found himself in and that it’s all his fault.

So, when Saturday rolls around and there are plans to get together at Dustin’s house to hang out, Mike’s beyond relieved. Even if they just watch Star Wars for the millionth time, it’ll be better than him just laying around by himself and moping all day – this way, he’ll at least be distracted by his friends.

Mike’s the last one to get to Dustin’s house and he has to drive himself since he slept in even later than he usually does on Saturday and misses out on catching a ride with Lucas.

“Hey man, you made it. It’s about time, too. You’re the last one here,” Dustin says when he lets Mike in.

Mike rolls his eyes. “Sorry I overslept a little. I’ll go report myself to the Friend Police so they can throw the book at me for my horrific crime.”

Dustin grins, chortling, and shuts the door behind Mike. “God, you’re punchy today.”

“It’s been a week and I’m just glad it’s Saturday,” Mike says, following Dustin as they head to the den and the sounds of something playing on the TV.

“Didn’t say I minded, just making an observation, *Michael,*” Dustin says, eyebrow arched with teasing reprimand.

Mike stifles a sigh at Dustin’s dramatics as he walks into the den –
– and freezes when his gaze slides over to where Will is sitting on the couch. Will’s looking back at him, the look on his eyes unflinchingly hard and tinged with confusion, like he’s judging and wondering what the fuck is wrong with Mike.

But then Mike blinks and, like a mirage, the hard look in Will’s eyes is gone, replaced with his usual open warmth. Mike can’t help the confusion that ripples through him. Was he just imagining things? Or is Will mad at him for something?

Mike’s not sure and he hates the way uncertainty slithers into his stomach. And it doesn’t entirely go away, not even when everyone’s crowded in the den, arguing good-naturedly over what to watch.

(Dustin argues for an original trilogy watch, claiming that “it’s been too long since we’ve seen what true quality looks like”, but Lucas manages to successfully argue for “Another Life” on Netflix since it’s something they haven’t seen and, quote, “it has Starbuck in it. How can you go wrong with Katee Sackhoff?” and the others can’t help but agree with him, effectively outvoting their host.)

Partway through the third episode, Mike’s convinced that he didn’t actually do anything wrong to Will, but that Will’s just in a bad mood or slept funny or something. Because, while Will seems a little terse and tired, he’s not actually snapping at Mike or anything, and Mike knows Will tends to get snippy when he’s pissed.

So Mike lets himself relax and have a good day with his friends – honestly, he deserves something to go his way after the week he’s had. It’s nice to just spend time with his friends, with the guys he’s known for what feels like forever, and just let his problems fade into the background.

They get most of the way through the season before Lucas reaches for the remote and pauses it before it can autoplay the next episode. “Ok, losers, while I’d love to keep watching this with you, I need to go – got a date with Max tonight.”

Dustin snickers. “An actual date or are you two just gonna park near Lover’s Lake and go at it for 3 hours?”

It’s a miracle that Lucas doesn’t glare at Dustin, but the look on his face is close, flat and just 100% done. “Not that it’s any of your business, but I’m gonna take her out to dinner and then we’ll see what she wants to do after that.”

“Yeah, hopefully it’s you,” Dustin says. A self-satisfied, cheeky grin is plastered on his face and he’s the only one laughing at his dumbass comments, but he doesn’t seem to care. Mike kind of envies that Dustin can do that, but isn’t sure if it’s ignorant bliss or confidence driving it. Still, Mike rolls his eyes at Dustin anyway, because that’s the kind of reaction Dustin is hoping to get out everyone (Lucas lets out his own long-suffering groan, which makes Dustin all but crow with victory).

Something nudges into Mike’s side and he looks over to see Will pulling his elbow away. “Hey, mind giving me a ride home? Lucas drove me here, but since he’s going to be getting ready for his date…..” Will lets the rest of his sentence trail off, but Mike can fill in the rest of the pieces.

“Yeah, sure, no problem,” Mike says with a shrug. “You know you never have to ask, by the way.”

Will pauses, head tilted to one side – again, leaving Mike feeling like he’s being judged under a microscope, or something – but he smiles a split second later, almost shy. “Yeah, well, you know, s’rude not to ask.”

Mike grins and turns to where Dustin and Lucas are about to start bickering. “Hey, idiots,” he says as he stands. “I’m going to give Will a ride home, so we’re out of here, too.”
That stops everything before it can devolve further and the Party all says their goodbyes before going their separate ways: Dustin back to the den, Lucas to his car, and Mike to his car with Will.

It’s when Mike and Will are by themselves in the car that Mike’s feels the car fill with tension. Seems like whatever was bothering Will is back and Mike doesn’t even get the chance to ask what’s wrong before Will blurts it out.

“El told me about what happened.”

It’s like a bomb goes off inside the car and Mike jumps so hard, he jerks the steering wheel. “Wha-what?”

Mike glances over to see Will shifting in his seat so he can face Mike. “My mom and I had dinner at their house last night. El and I were hanging out. She seemed upset and when I asked her what was wrong, she told me.”

His throat is dry, tongue feeling like it’s been taken over by the Sahara, and Mike swallows to try and generate some moisture. Ok, of all the things he expected Will to know about, this is just about at the bottom of the list. Unless…. “Oh? Um, what – what did she say?”

Will sighs and Mike can just hear Will rolling his eyes. “Don’t play dumb with me, Mike. She told me she asked you to Homecoming and you turned her down, that you said you don’t like her like that.”

At that, Mike’s eyes go wide. That’s not what happened. It’s not. “What? No! That – that’s not what I said.”

“Oh, really?” God, Mike can hear the anger in Will’s voice, low and steely. “You saying El lied to me about what happened?” Mike has nothing to say to that and the beginning of panic begin rising in his throat, filling him with tingling numbness. “I just…. ” Will trails off with a sigh. “Look, I don’t get it. You like her, we both know it. I thought you’d be thrilled to go out with her, that she asked you out.

“Look, it’s a bad idea!” Mike all but yells, cutting Will off. The panic coursing through his veins turns to anger and his hands clench the steering wheel tightly, knuckles turning white. “Guys like me don’t belong with girls like her, no matter what she thinks. You think I want to go to a dance with someone like her when I’m going to get laughed at all night by people who think I don’t belong with her? That’s even if I don’t make myself look like a complete fucking fool. Besides, she didn’t seem bothered by it today, or anything, so she’s clearly already gotten over it and I don’t know why you’re even—”

“Because you made her cry!” Will’s yell echoes in the car’s interior and Mike finds anything he has to say dying before he can even think of voicing it. “She likes you, Mike. She really likes you and she’s hurt because she thinks you don’t like her back. Now, no one says you’re required to go with the dance with her, or anything. But you at least owe her the truth.”

Mike swallows hard, even as his heart clenches painfully in his chest, Will’s words worming into his brain with sickening realization – no, no, oh god he made her cry? how could he do that to her? he’s the world’s biggest asshole. fuck he doesn’t deserve to be in the same room as her, much less talk to her. “Look, it’s not as easy as you’re making out to be.” He all but croaks out the words, knowing he’s sounding weak and whiny, but he doesn’t care, not when his heart feels like it’s breaking in two.

He made her cry.
“Dude, relationships aren’t easy,” Will spits out. “I mean, I’ve never been in one, but even I know that. But, even if you only want to be her friend, she deserves to know the truth. And don’t let her fool you by letting her pretend like she’s fine – she’s not.”

“Sure seemed like it yesterday,” Mike says, grumbling even while his heart is sinking into his stomach.

“Yeah, well, I don’t know if you’ve noticed this,” Will says, tone flat and wry. “But El is a pretty proud person. She wouldn’t let the person who hurt her know that they had.”

Mike has noticed this, but he’s been too lovesick to really think that all the way through. And, god, it feels like he’s been punched in the gut, hearing that he’s hurt El, that El is in pain because of him.

A long silence takes over the car and, maybe a minute later, Will clears his throat. “So, you gonna talk to her?”

As much as Mike hates to admit it, he’s not sure. “I don’t know,” he croaks out as he turns down the road that leads to Will’s house. “I mean, I’m not good at this kind of stuff, Will. And I don’t know what El expects of me. I don’t know why she likes talking to me or wants to hang out with me or any of it.”

Will breathes out a laugh, but it’s a gentle one, kind and sympathetic. “Did you ever think that she doesn’t actually expect anything from you at all? That she just likes you because she likes you? Not everyone has an angle, Mike. And I know it’s hard to believe, but I think El really, truly likes you. And, again, you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to, but… isn’t it maybe worth seeing what can happen?”

Oh, that thought’s the kind of seductive that’s dangerous. That’s the kind of thought that opens him up to being taken advantage and made a fool of, the kind of thought that leaves him exposed and vulnerable… and Mike doesn’t know if he’s able to take those kinds of risks, even if he wants to.

The rest of the ride home is quiet. Mike doesn’t have an answer for Will and Will seems content not to push now that he’s gotten what’s bothering him out of his system.

It’s only when Mike stops up the driveway to Will’s house that Will speaks again. “I hope you talk to her,” Will says, hand resting on the door handle. “I know you’re scared, and you have every right to be given… well, you know.” Mike attempts to breathe out a humorless laugh, wry and dark, but it sounds more like a whimper than anything. “But I think there could be something special with you and El. You just have to be willing to let it happen.” Will shrugs and glances away. “That’s what I think, at any rate.” He looks back at Mike and gives him a small wave. “Well, see ya later.”

“Yeah, bye,” Mike mutters, still feeling shell-shocked and almost numb.

Will gets out of the car and then Mike’s just left with his thoughts. He drives home in a blur, spending the entire time trying to wrap his head around the schism it’s just gone through.

He’s nowhere close to successful.

Mike obsesses over this the rest of the weekend. Oh, sure, he does his homework and studies for his Chem test. But, even then, he doesn’t stop thinking about everything Will’s told him and trying to reconcile it with what he’s seen, what he’s experienced.

None of it makes sense.

El was fine on Friday, is the truth he holds to, clutching it tightly like a mental security blanket. And
she wasn’t that broken up by what happened on Thursday at the time – she was apologetic and embarrassed, sure, but not hurt.

But then he thinks about what Will said, about how El cried because of him and Mike just wants to die. It hurts more than he thought possible to know that El was crying because of him. Literally the last thing Mike ever wants is make her cry, no matter what’s going on between them. And Mike knows there’s a simple solution to fixing this, to mending the hurt he’s caused El.

*He needs to talk to her. And tell her the truth this time.*

And there’s the crux of the problem. The idea of telling El the truth is about the most frightening thing he’s ever imagined and he doesn’t know if he’s brave enough to go through with it.

It’s a realization that plagues him the rest of the weekend and he can’t even stop thinking about it long enough to fall asleep properly on Sunday night.

*Let’s see what she’s like tomorrow,* is the conclusion Mike eventually lands on. He needs to see with his own two eyes what Will’s talking about, needs to see if El’s as hurt as Will claims she is. And then, maybe, hopefully, he can think about summoning up the courage to talk to her, to apologize….

To hope that he hasn’t horribly and irreparably fucked everything up.

It’s like, once Mike knows what to look for, once he knows that there is something to look for, he can’t unsee it. The signs have all been there the entire time and, like an idiot, Mike misread every single one of them.

El being just friendly? That’s not a sign of her moving on, that’s a sign that she’s trying to shield herself. The way she doesn’t flirt with him anymore? That’s because she’s trying to respect what she thinks are his wishes, not that she doesn’t care about him anymore.

And every time El drops his gaze a couple of seconds before she normally would, every time her smile doesn’t quite reach her eyes when they talk, every time he can see her reaching out to touch him before jerking her hand back, fast like she’s hoping he won’t notice, Mike’s heart twists and cracks just a little bit more.

If he didn’t know what to look for, he could easily look at El – dressed today in a pair of jeans and an adorable Powerpuff Girls t-shirt – and think that everything’s fine and dandy. But he’s watching for it now.

And he feels like the worst person on the face of the planet.

For a Monday, everything seems to go ok – classes are fine and his Chem test goes by about as well as he could have hoped for. But he’s preoccupied with El just about the whole day, so everything else lingers in the background as Mike realizes that he’s facing a choice now that he knows Will was telling him the truth: he has to decide whether or not he’s going to talk to El about it, hasn’t decided if he’s going to come clean and apologize and see if there’s anywhere to go from there.

There’s part of him screaming no, no he’s not ready for this! It’s a dark voice, a familiar one, the one that’s done a pretty good job of protecting him mostly without incident these past several years. It’s the voice of caution, the one that keeps him safe and from doing something truly embarrassing. There’s only been a couple of times that voice has been asleep at the wheel and those times have
been catastrophic.

But, there’s another voice inside of him, one that grows in strength with each passing beat of his heart. It’s the voice that’s saying yes, yes he can do this – he has to. It’s the voice of warmth and hope and yearning. It’s the part of him that wants so bad to reach out to El, to be open and honest and let her in and take what she’s offering in return. It’s a voice Mike wishes he had the strength to listen to – maybe he’d be a better person if he could.

Back and forth, he wrestles with himself all day, knowing he’s at an impasse until he figures it out and chooses one and he honestly thinks he’s going to get an ulcer from all the angst and worry he’s putting into this.

But it all comes to a head a little before 8PM when Mike finds himself randomly scrolling through his text message history with El. It's not something he set out to do, but as he picked up his phone to check the time, he found himself navigating to his text messages without even thinking twice about it.

El hasn’t texted him since Thursday, since the day everything went well and truly wrong, and the way clarity slams into him makes him gasp aloud, shocking his entire system like he’s grabbed onto a live wire.

He misses her, he realizes – misses her with a longing that borders on painful. He misses flirting with her and hearing her laugh and, just talking with her. He misses the warmth of her gaze and the delicate touch of her hand on his arm. He misses the way he’s come to rely on her to be a part of his life. And, yes, she’s been there with him in class on Friday and earlier today, but she hasn’t really been there and it cuts into him like a knife how much he misses her, how much he wants her to come back to him.

And he thinks he would do just about anything to get her back.

Maybe he’ll come to regret this, maybe he’ll make a fool of himself – he really doesn’t know yet. But Mike’s tired of feeling this way, tired of being hurt and tired of missing El, tired of being scared to go after what he wants, tired of letting the voices in his head dictate his life and making him fear every little thing.

This time, it’s going to be different.

This time, Mike’s going to go for it. He’s not sure how, but he’s going to damn well try.

Before Mike can talk himself out of it, before he can work through all the ways this might blow up in his face, he pushes himself away from his desk and only has enough presence of mind to grab his keys and his wallet before racing out of his room and down the stairs. He pokes his head in the kitchen to let out a quick “Mom, gonna drop something off at Will’s house – be right back” before he’s out the door, not even waiting for his mom’s reply, not even grabbing a jacket to ward against the cool night air.

No, he’s not stopping for anything, this time.

Not even himself.

It’s a little after 8 when the doorbell rings and El’s heart leaps into her throat.
She’s upstairs, sitting on her bed, having long traded her jeans for flannel PJ pants, papers and textbooks spread all around her, and she looks up while she’s in the middle of working on her French worksheet to look in the direction of the front door, like she’ll be able to see who’s standing out on her porch if she just stares hard enough.

A moment of indecision passes through her – Hopper’s not home, having gone into the station to respond to a robbery – and El’s alone. She knows Hawkins is safe, but still, a teenage girl at home at night, answering the door… that’s a recipe for all kinds of badness.

_But, really, what are the odds of that?_ the logical side of her argues back and El finds herself sliding off her bed and rushing downstairs before she can talk herself out of it. After all, she doesn’t let fear rule her life, no matter how it turns out.

But she almost reconsiders that stance when she opens the door to reveal Mike standing on the other side, pretty much one of the _last_ people she wants to see right now.

There aren’t many lights on – the porch light is still turned off and the only lights that illuminate the space are the low lamp light of the family room just behind her to her right and the more distant light from the hallway upstairs. But, even still, El can see the way Mike’s standing there, dressed in only a white t-shirt and jeans, arms crossed tight over his chest like he’s trying to conserve body heat. Which, is probably _exactly_ what he’s doing, given the chill El can feel in the air.

For a moment, a split second, El’s not sure what to do or what’s going on. Part of her wants to slam the door in his face, the part of her that’s hurt and mourning because of the boy standing on the other side of her door.

But the bigger part of her, the part that ultimately wins, is curious and kind of concerned, wondering what’s going on, wondering if everything’s ok… wondering why Mike is at her house at 8 at night and standing in the cold without a jacket on and _desperately_ wanting answers.

“Mike?” she asks, his name slipping from her lips with a breathiness that she just can’t control… but she’s hoping the confusion in her voice will mask it.

Mike gives her a small smile and his shoulders somehow manage to fold in closer. “Um, El, hi,” he says with a tremor in his voice that El figures is from the cold, but probably also from nervousness given he can’t seem to hold her gaze for more than a second at a time. “Can we… I just – I wanted to talk, if that’s ok.”

For the second time in less than five minutes, El’s heart leaps into her throat. “Oh, um, yeah, sure.” She blinks and gives herself a small shake, a huffed, self-effacing laugh escaping her. “Here, come in. It’s cold outside.”

“Thanks,” Mike says with a sigh heavy with relief, stepping across the threshold when El moves to let him. “I won’t stay long – I know your dad’s not home, saw that his car wasn’t here and–”

“Yeah, there was a robbery, or something.” El says with a vague hand wave while she closes the door with the other. “He probably won’t be back for a while, so you don’t have to worry about it.”

“Oh,” Mike says, arms uncrossing from their tight wrap around his chest. He stuffs his hands in his pockets and rocks back and forth on his heels. “So….” He trails off and a thick silence fills the space between them.

El squirms, almost uncomfortable with the air that surrounds them. “Did you want to sit down?” she says after a beat, brow furrowing as she looks up at Mike.
Mike licks his lips as he looks down at her, a nervous gesture that does the really unfortunate thing of making El look down at his mouth and remember that she still very much wants to know what it’s like to kiss him. Damn her traitorous heart. “Oh, um, yeah, sure. That’s… that’s, yeah, good idea.”

El gestures to the space behind Mike and she follows him as he heads towards the family room. They sit down on the couch, a good foot and a half of space between them, and El turns to look at him, one leg folded in front of her while the other hangs off the edge of the couch.

She takes a moment to look at him. Mike’s sitting in almost perfect profile, hands resting lightly on his thighs as he stares down at the floor just past his toes. She can feel the nervousness and fear that radiating from him, can see the way his jaw clenches and throat bobs as he swallows heavily, and despite herself, despite everything that’s happened, she finds her heart going out to him.

(even though it’s so not fair how good he looks right now in the low light that surrounds them, the dim, warm light casting the most intriguing shadows across the angles of his face, jaw, and neck, making his skin luminous and his freckles all the more prominent and irresistible. damn him for being so good looking.)

But there’s only so long El can sit there in awkward, nervous silence. “So… what did you want to talk about?” she asks, tentative and quiet.

Even that seems to startle him and Mike looks over at her with wide eyes. There’s fear and resolve reflected in equal measure in his gaze and it makes El’s heart clench painfully in her chest. He looks away after a beat, fear temporarily winning out. “I’m sorry,” he mutters.

At this, El frowns. Sorry? “What are you sorry for?”

Mike draws in a shaky breath, licking his lips once more. He pulls his arms in and hunches almost painfully over himself. “I’m not… I’m not good at this kind of stuff,” he says, glancing over at her as a humorless chuckle escapes from him.

“This kind of stuff?” El parrots back, eyebrow arching. She’s trying here, she really is… but Mike’s not making it easy to follow along with where he’s going with this.

“Yeah, this,” Mike says, gesturing to the space between them like that’ll explain everything.

El sighs, feeling tired. “Mike, I’m trying, but I’m just not getting—”

“When you asked me to Homecoming and I said no,” Mike says, cutting her off. A shocked gasp escapes her, breath sticking in her throat. “I didn’t say no because I wanted to. I said no because….”

El finds herself leaning forward, desperate for the answer to the question that’s been plaguing her for days now. “Because…?” she says, almost breathless with encouragement.

“Because I’m horrible at this.” Mike risks a glance over at her, gaze dancing all over her face for a brief second before he looks away again. “I’ve just… never really done this before and I’m still not sure what I’m doing.”

El thinks she’s starting to understand what he’s trying to get at. “Oh, Mike….”

“And I almost didn’t come over, I almost talked myself out of it on the drive over,” Mike says, his words starting to pick up steam.

“So why did you come over?” El asks.
“Had a talk with Will,” Mike says with tight smile. “Essentially told me I was being an idiot.” He pauses, drawing in a shaky breath. “I was an idiot and I hurt you. I didn’t mean to, but I did.” He looks over at her, imploring. “It’s just that I’m me and you’re, well… you’re you and I’m scared about messing all of this up and I didn’t mean to make you think that I didn’t, y’know, want any of this and—”

Oh.

Oh.

She understands now – god, does El get it now.

Mike’s scared, filled with a bone-deep, paralyzing fear. And when she asked him to Homecoming, she pushed him too far, too fast and he reacted like she’d expect anyone acting from a position of fear: he panicked. But he’s here, trying, making an effort, and El can’t help it: the hurt and sadness she’s been suffering from over the past few days just melts away.

“Mike,” she says, low but forceful, cutting him off mid-ramble. He freezes, staring at her with wide eyes and El can’t help but smile. “Thank you – for telling me and for saying you’re sorry.”

“So… you’re not mad at me?” The look on Mike’s face is both confused and worried, like he’s afraid he’s messed everything up and prepared to hear the worst.

El shakes her head. “No, I’m not mad.” She shifts on the couch, scooting closer to him, and holds out her hand, palm up. “Here, take my hand.” Mike looks down, brow furrowing with shy confusion that is just about the most adorable thing El’s ever seen, and a giggle almost escapes her (she can’t help it, though – she’s just so happy as what’s happening starts to sink in). “Don’t worry, it won’t hurt,” she says, low and soothing like she’s calming a spooked animal.

Slowly, Mike removes his arms from where they’re wrapped around his torso so he can reach for her with the hand that’s closest to her. El’s all too aware that this is going to be the first time he’s ever touched her, not the other way around, and her heart pounds heavy and fast in her chest at the realization. His fingers unfurl from the loose fist they’ve been held in as his hand gets close, moving slowly but surely towards her own.

El keeps her gaze focused on Mike’s face, which is why she can see him glancing back and forth between her hand and her face, like he’s trying to make sure she’s not going to pull her hand away or something, like he’s making sure he can trust her. El’s heart gives a sharp twist in her chest – hurting for him, for whatever he’s gone through – but she keeps her expression soft and patient and waits for Mike to finish taking her hand.

There’s a point, at nearly the last second, where Mike freezes, uncertainty pinching at the corners of his eyes, jaw tightening as he swallows roughly. But, despite how much El wants to just take his hand, she knows this is something Mike needs to do himself and she finds a wellspring of patience inside her she never knew existed. Whatever he needs to be comfortable, she tells herself.

But then Mike’s palm touches hers and the way warmth explodes inside El’s veins, centered in her heart, makes her almost gasp. She’s trembling, just a little, as she curls her fingers around Mike’s hand and feels him do the same. The feel of his hand in hers, of his palm pressed against hers, fingers holding each other, makes her whole body sing. His hand is warm, grip gentle but strong, and her hand feels engulfed by his.

El loves it – god, does she love it.
Mike’s gaze is focused on where they’re now holding hands, eyes wide, but he drags his gaze back up to hers and El’s smile grows wider as sheer happiness floods her, bright and warm. The look in Mike’s eyes is surprised and happy, but still nervous, and El wishes it didn’t make her feel all fluttery inside. “There, see? I’m not mad. How could we be holding hands if I was mad?”

Mike stares at her, brow furrowing in confusion, and he lets out a sharp, heavy sigh. “I just….” He shakes his head, frowning. His expression is pinched, echoes of pain and fear in the edges of his gaze. But, mostly, he’s just confused, looking at her with a kind of sad curiosity. “How do you do it?”

Now it’s El’s turn to be confused. “Do what?”

Another harsh sigh escapes Mike and he gestures vaguely towards her with the hand she’s not holding. “This. Not be scared. You’re just so… I don’t know, fearless, I guess is what I’m trying to say. I don’t know if I could ever be like that.” He’s looking at her like she holds all the answers to all the questions in the universe and she feels it deep in her chest, how overwhelmed she is by the trust he’s showing in her, by how he’s letting himself be open and vulnerable.

Her smile softens, lips curling up in a gentle smile, and El shifts her hand in Mike’s, weaving her fingers through his and squeezing their palms together. His hand’s grown a little clammy, but so has El’s and she doesn’t care. “I’m not fearless – there’s plenty I’m scared about,” she says, voice hushed. “I’m scared of small spaces, I’m scared of whales—”

At that, Mike breathes out a laugh, the first real one since he got to her house. “Whales?” A tiny grin quirks up the corners of his lips, eyebrow arching just so, and her stomach gives that tell-tale swoop as she swoons, just a little.

“Yes, whales – there’s no reason for them to be that big and you know it,” she says, muttering a little, before she grows serious again. “But I’m also scared of hurting the people I care about, scared of pushing them away, of losing them. I’m scared everyday, but I don’t let it stop me. It’s been worth it, every time, to push through the fear.”

Mike gulps, nodding. “I know that, I just….” He sighs and drops his gaze down to their joined hands. There’s a long moment as he just stares and El looks down as well, taking in the sight of how their hands look together, fingers interlocked like it’s the most natural thing they could be doing. It feels right and El never knew she could be so happy just from holding hands with someone. “I don’t want to be scared anymore,” Mike says, both of them looking back up at each other. “I don’t – I just want this – I…. I don’t know how to do this.”

El gives Mike’s hand another squeeze and a thrill shoots through her when she feels him squeeze back. “It’s not something we’re born knowing how to do, and that’s ok.” She smiles, one hand coming up to push away the strands of hair that have fallen in front of her face, fingers curling delicately around her ear. “We’ll just… take this one day at a time, see what happens.”

Mike nods. “One day at a time, see what happens,” he echoes, murmuring the words, like he’s trying them out to see how he likes them. He smiles a moment later as the words seem to sink in. “That sounds… yeah, I think I can do that.”

El giggles, the sound trailing off into a soft sigh. Her heart races at how he looks in the low lamp light, how it emphasizes the curl of his lips, the softness of his expression, the faint blush that’s spread across his cheeks, and she finds her face heating up in return. She so badly wants to kiss him right now, more than she’s ever wanted just about anything in her entire life. But she holds herself back. Mike isn’t ready for that and she knows, now, that she needs to let him drive this, whatever happens between them. Consent works both ways, after all.
“Good,” El says. “That’s good. And just so you know, I’m happy you came over tonight.” Mike looks at her, one eyebrow arched curiously, and El lets out another giggle. “I’ve missed being myself around you and I’m glad I don’t have to hold back anymore.”

Mike rolls his eyes and lets out a sighing chuckle. “Can’t believe I’m going to say this, but I’ve kinda missed your overt flirting.”

The admission sends shockwaves of warm happiness rippling through her, leaving pleasure-filled tingles in their wake. “So you do like it. I knew it,” El says, bright and happy, unable to keep from giggling.

Mike’s lips are curled up in a small grin and the look he gives her is really testing her resolve to not reach over and kiss him right now. “Don’t get cocky, now.”

“Oh, I would never,” El says, fighting to control her own grin. It’s a losing battle, though, and her lips curl up mischievously as she winks at him.

Mike lets out a breathless laugh. “And, there it is.” He’s trying to sound resigned, but the smile on his face is a dead giveaway that he’s anything but.

“Uh-uh, I know you like it, now, so you don’t get to play that card with me anymore.” El feels a little dizzy as they sit there, spinning from the emotional whiplash. 15 minutes ago, she was still suffering from the sadness and hurt of Mike’s rejection of her; now, she feels like she’s on Cloud 9, happiness infusing every cell in her body, the sadness of the past few days nothing more than a bad dream.

“God, what have I gotten myself into?” Mike grumbles, but he’s still smiling and El knows it’s just an act. He sighs a moment later, the mood mellowing down to warm happiness from the bright humor of the past minute. “I should get going, though. Told my mom I was just dropping something off at Will’s house – if I don’t get back, she’ll probably call to find out what’s going on.”

El sighs, not wanting him to go, but understanding that he has to. “Yeah, ok,” she says. “C’mon, I’ll walk you to the door.” She stands up, fingers still entwined with his – she’s not letting go of his hand until she absolutely has to – and tugs on Mike’s hand.

Mike takes her cue, standing up a split-second later, and a shy smile crosses his face as he looks down at their joined hands. “Not letting go, huh?”

“Nope,” El says, popping the “p” just slightly, unable to stop smiling.

Hand-in-hand, they walk to the front door and El opens it with her free hand, both of them shivering as the cool night air hits them. “You know,” El says, grinning up at him. “You should have worn a jacket.”

“So sue me,” Mike says with flat stare. “I wasn’t really thinking straight.”

“Didn’t want to give yourself time to talk yourself out of it?” El asks, turning so she’s facing him completely.

“Something like that,” Mike says with a shrug, lips curling up in a half-grin.

El sighs, knowing he has to go home but not wanting to let him. “You should get going.”

At that, Mike laughs. “I would, but someone won’t let go of my hand.” He arches an eyebrow at her, giving her a pointed look that makes her giggle despite herself.
“Ok, ok,” El says. “Just….” She tugs on his hand, enough so that he leans forward just a little, and it’s enough so that, when she stands on her toes, she can just reach his cheek with her lips. She shouldn’t be doing this, she’s pretty sure, but she can’t help herself. El just feels so much for Mike and this is the only outlet she has for it right now.

Mike gasps against her cheek, breath fanning out against her skin with a sharp puff of air, and El knows it’s only a matter of time before she knows what it’ll feel like when he finally kisses her back.

The feel of his cheek beneath her lips fills her with the most delicious kind of warmth. She loves how close he is to her in this moment and she hates that he has to go. But she knows he can’t stay, so she settles back down on her heels a second later, smiling up at him, well aware that everything she’s feeling is written on every inch of her face. “Good night, Mike.”

For just a second, Mike stares down at her, pleasure and surprise warring on his face, but he smiles after a moment, letting out a wistful sigh that El feels down to her toes. “Good night, El. See you tomorrow?”

“Of course, always,” El says. She stands by the door and slowly lets go of Mike’s hand as he crosses over the threshold, walking backwards so he doesn’t have to look away. And, when she does finally have to let go of Mike’s hand, she finds herself immediately missing the warmth of his palm against hers, missing the feeling of their fingers woven together like they were made to hold each other’s hand and no one else’s. A soft sigh escapes her, all happy and wistful and just… overwhelmed in the best way possible.

Mike gives her one last shy smile and a small wave of his hand. “Bye, El.”

El smiles, knowing she’s looking all lovesick and giddy, but, god, she so doesn’t care. “Bye, Mike.”

Still smiling, she closes the door behind her and leans back against it. Only, unlike the last time she did this, she’s smiling uncontrollably and she can’t help the giggle that escapes her, or the sigh that follows as her hands come up to press against her wildly beating heart.

She was right – god, she was right. He does like her the same way she likes him – he just has a different speed he needs to move at, is all. And that’s fine. Hell, that’s more than fine. Because she knows now, knows that what she’s feeling isn’t unrequited. Everything else is only a matter of time.

And, god, she has never been happier.

For a moment, Mike just stares at El’s front door, still smiling, feeling shock ripple through him with unbearable happiness. He can still feel El’s hand in his, her lips on his cheek, can still see her bright smile and flirty wink and god, he can’t believe he managed to do this. She forgave him for being the world’s biggest idiot and, best of all, she still likes him.

And, to make things even better, she understands that he’s scared, that he’s never done anything like this before, and he doesn’t know how he got so lucky to be on the receiving end of her gentle patience, but Mike knows it’s a gift he’ll never be able to repay.

Mike doesn’t stop smiling as he eventually turns and walks towards his car. The night air doesn’t feel so cold, not against the warmth that runs through him from knowing that he hasn’t irredeemably fucked everything up, that this thing between him and El seems to be here to stay… that they’re going to take it one day at a time, that she’s willing to do that for him.
Mike knows he still doesn’t deserve her, knows that she can do so much better than him. But, for the first time, the thought doesn’t seem so daunting. Because now he knows.

One day, he’ll be good enough for her.

One day, he’ll be worthy.

*Now, he just has to prove it.*

Chapter End Notes

**SO.** How ’bout that, eh? We are *so much closer* than we were just a little bit ago! This is one of the big turning points of the fic, so I hope you all enjoyed it!

Some BTS before I go: I originally planned to end the previous chapter right after Mike turns down El’s invitation to Homecoming, but decided that was Too Mean and lumped it in with *whatever this is* (not sure if you can call it brilliance - *madness*, perhaps). So you’re welcome from sparing you that particular cliffhanger (I will accept your heart-felt gratitude now :p )

On another note, I’ve done the dumb thing and signed up for NaNoWriMo as a way to keep up my word count for this fic. So expect 2-3 chapters of the next month or so. I’m challenging myself and, boy, do I love using a progress bar as a way to do that (RIP my sanity).

In the meantime, come and bug me on tumblr! I’m @fatechica there, same as here, so come flail with me about mileven and Stranger Things and just *life* in general. Otherwise, catch y'all on the flip side!

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