

Chapter 3

Elle shivered and ran the back of her hand across her face, feeling the trail of moisture that was quickly freezing on her cheek. She shivered again, in spite of the coat, and glanced up at Jeff.

"What do you want?" She asked, not without hesitation. Elle was still quite off-balance from the sudden turn her memories had taken. She was trying to summon up her usual venom, to get Jeff to leave her alone in peace, but in her heart she knew it was pointless. She just didn't have the energy for venom right now. And, truth be told, wrapping his coat around her shoulders was probably the nicest thing anyone had done for her in quite a while...

"Nothing... Nothing at all," Jeff said, with a neutral expression. "I just didn't think you really wanted to deal with the teachers right now... You really looked like you could use a break from everything going on, especially when we were upstairs, so I thought we could come down here and just sit for a little while." He sighed and looked around at the deserted courtyard, the grass lightly covered by a thin blanket of fresh snow, giving the place a calm, peaceful look -- hardly like it belonged in the center of a bustling school like Northwoods High. Jeff turned around and looked back at the shaking girl across the table from him and was suddenly sure of one thing; some of the shaking wasn't from the cold. There was something very, very wrong with this picture. While Jeff didn't know her very well at all, he'd picked up on one thing almost immediately: *This girl didn't seem to have anyone on her side.*

And that, he thought, is a problem. He'd been there himself in the past, before his family moved to Glenwood, and he had the scars to prove it. The only thing that had kept him going was his studies. He was a straight-A student, and planned to keep it that way. He wouldn't settle for anything less than top-5 in his class, and he was even solidly in the running for valedictorian. If it weren't for his determination to graduate, to achieve *something* with his life, he couldn't imagine where he'd be. Heck, even *with* his determination, it'd been a rough year or so.

Jeff was broken out of his train of thought by a noise from across the table. He looked up to see Elizabeth looking at him, expectantly.

"Lost in your own world there?"

“Something like that. Just thinking about... stuff.” He replied with a shrug.

She sighed. “I know the feeling,” she said softly. Elizabeth suddenly looked up at Jeff with a quizzical expression. “Why are you here, Jeff?” She asked, almost whispering. “I mean... Why are you sitting here, talking to me? Why did you walk me down here? Why didn’t you just tell me where to go and send me out on my own and go spend the period with your friends or something?”

“Because,” he replied quietly, “it seemed like you really needed someone on your side today.”

“What would you know about...” Elizabeth started to say.

He held up his hand to stop her. He may have lacked experience, but he could see this one coming a mile away. She was about to tell him that he had no idea what she was feeling and to leave her the hell alone. Which he didn’t want to do. Not yet, at least. It was obvious that she was hurting, whether or not she wanted to admit it to him.

“I know more than you think. I’ve been there myself, Elizabeth. Before we moved here last year, I didn’t have anyone. My parents and I didn’t get along. My sister and I could barely stand each other. And I didn’t have a single friend. I know what it’s like not to have anyone. Whether or not you want to believe it, I know what it’s like to go to bed hoping you won’t wake up in the morning. I looked into your eyes today and what I saw scared me. I remember what it was like to feel like that, and I don’t care how much of a bitch you might have been, I don’t want to see anyone else going through that. If it weren’t for my plans, I would’ve killed myself last year... As it was, I came close. I don’t want anyone to feel that alone.”

“You don’t know a thing about me. What makes you think I want you here?” Elizabeth replied, starting to get worked up. The thought that he had been able to see all that today was enough to scare the shit out of her. Even now, though, there was another feeling deep inside, beside the fear. In a deep, dark part of herself, she wondered why no one else had ever seen it.

Jeff shrugged and looked away, squaring his shoulders and taking a deep breath. “Tell

me you don't, then. Tell me to leave you alone, Elizabeth, and I will. All I'm trying to do is offer you a shoulder to cry on, if you want it. It seems like you're drowning out there, and I'm tossing you a lifeline. If you don't want it, fine, I won't bother you again. I just thought that maybe you could use a friend today."

Elle didn't know how to reply to that. Fortunately, Jeff saved her from needing to. He glanced at his watch and stood up, brushing the snow off of his pants.

"We need to get going; we've still got to collect the rest of those attendance sheets. If we move, we can probably get done in ten or fifteen minutes, and you can go back to whatever it is you really want to be doing. If we don't get them done the office will be all over us, though, and I don't think you need any more trouble today." Jeff said tersely.

"Heh. Not hardly." Elle replied. "And I don't want to get you in trouble, either," she said very softly, brushing the bit of snow from her pants and slipping Jeff's coat off her shoulders. "Thank you, for the coat, I mean..." she whispered again, so quietly that she couldn't even be sure she'd spoken the words aloud. Jeff just nodded, holding the door open for her and taking his coat.

The two students went back upstairs and continued collecting the attendance sheets, mostly in silence. Elle had a lot to think about. She knew, in her heart, that Jeff was right. She did need a friend today. What she didn't know was how to deal with that. Towards the end of the period the silence finally got to be too much for them both, and they started talking again. Not about anything significant, just the idle chatter of two people working together, but it made her feel more at ease with herself.

Elle found out that Jeff worked in the office again during last period -- when she had a study hall. She didn't say anything to Jeff about it, but when they were back in the office collecting their stuff at the end of the period she poked her head into Dr. Smith's office again.

"Would you mind if I came back here during study hall?" She asked softly, hoping that he said yes.

He looked at her for a minute, trying to figure out what had gotten into her. *Elizabeth Miller* wanted to volunteer to work in the deans' office? That was enough to shatter his entire

worldview. He wasn't about to question it, though.

"Sure, just come down here. I'll make sure you're not marked absent from study hall."

"Thanks," she replied, turning to leave.

The rest of the school day passed in a haze. Elle had never been one to pay too much attention in class, but today she was totally out of it. She couldn't stop thinking about their conversation. Something he'd said kept running through her head: He hadn't asked her for anything. For that matter, he'd said point blank that he didn't want anything from her. That wasn't the world she lived in. In the world she lived in, everyone wanted something from her. You never got something for nothing. If someone held out a hand to help her up, she expected the other hand to hold a knife. Here he was though, telling her flat out that he didn't want anything from her, and the people that were going to take something from her never said they didn't want anything, they just took. But Jeff wasn't taking; he was giving -- or at least, he was offering. He was offering something that in her heart she knew she wanted. He was offering her friendship. It wasn't just what he'd said, though that was a part of it. People lied all the time though, especially to her. It was that he showed it, too. The little things he did like putting his jacket around her when she was shivering - backed up what he said. People would lie straight to your face, sure, but would they be nice while they were doing it? Not really. Not that she'd ever known. She just sat there at a table in the corner, her thoughts going around in circles in her head. It wasn't until the bell rang signaling the end of lunch that she realized how long she'd been sitting there. She had spent her entire lunch period sitting there thinking. For the first time that she could remember she hadn't even *tried* to get high at lunch. Of course, she also hadn't even tried to eat, so maybe it all balanced out.

By the time her study hall rolled around, she knew one thing for sure. She wanted to spend some more time talking to this guy. She wanted to get to know him. Mostly though, she wanted -- needed -- a friend.

Jeff was shocked to see Elle walking back into the office that afternoon, but it was a pleasant surprise. He hadn't expected to see her again, not after what he'd said that morning, and he was really regretting that. As a matter of fact, he'd spent most of his lunch period trying to figure out how to apologize, because he was sure he'd went too far. He didn't want to chase her away, not that way. The more time he spent thinking about what he'd said, about

how they'd parted, the more he realized that he wanted to get to know her better. Before he could start to say what he wanted to however, she stopped him.

"Whatever you're about to say, don't." Elizabeth started, holding up her hand. "Do you walk to school?"

"Yeah -- I live up past Washington Street, so I usually walk. It's not too far, only maybe 15 or 20 minutes. How about you?"

"I live in the same direction, but not quite as far as you do. I'm a couple of blocks over." Elle replied, thinking. "Would you..." She started, sighing and taking a deep breath, trying to calm her nerves. "Would you mind walking with me today? I'd like to talk, but this really isn't the place," she said, crossing her fingers and hoping that he would say okay. She wasn't used to asking people for anything, and she could hardly believe how hard it had been to get the words out.

"Sure, I'll be glad to." Jeff said, breaking into a smile. He breathed a quiet sigh of relief himself.

After that exchange had broken the tension, the conversation flowed like water. They talked throughout the rest of the period as they worked, just getting to know each other. In between collecting the sheets from teachers and running passes Jeff discovered that they were both the same age: 14, two of the youngest students in the sophomore class.

"I skipped 4th grade," Jeff said at one point. "I was way ahead of a lot of the other kids, and my parents thought it'd be better if I was more challenged, rather than being kept back just to be with the rest of the class, so they talked to the school district. I had to sit down and talk to a bunch of psychologists for a couple of weeks, and then I had to take a ton of different tests over the summer, but when everything was said and done they all agreed, and I skipped fourth grade."

"Do you wish you hadn't?" Elizabeth asked curiously?

"Yes and no. Sometimes I do. I'm one of the youngest students in 10th grade. I'll be a senior before I can get my license, while most of my friends will get theirs Junior year. That

kind of stuff. Most of the time I don't mind, though. How about you, how come you're here at 14, did you skip a grade somewhere along the line?"

"Nope... I just started school a bit early, and when they suggested to my mother that I spend a second year in Kindergarten she said 'No way'. Apparently I had already learned what I needed to, so they just put me into first grade. I've been a grade ahead ever since. It's not too bad, though. My birthday is coming up, so I'm not going to be quite as far behind with my license and all as you are."

"Ohh? When's your birthday?"

"December 12th. How about yours?"

"Hmm... I'll have to remember that." Jeff said, smiling. "Mine is April 11th."

"Baby." Elizabeth said, grinning.

Jeff just grinned and stuck out his tongue.

By the time they'd finished their work for the day, Elle knew that Jeff's sister was 5 years younger, and they got along fairly well now, ever since his mom had lightened up on both of them. His father had left years before, and his mom was raising them both on her own.

For her part, as the period wound down, Elle was realizing more and more that she really enjoyed talking to Jeff. That fact surprised her. She wasn't much for conversation usually, especially with guys -- and even moreso with guys outside of her normal circle of "friends" -- but Jeff seemed to strike a chord with her for some reason.

After the final bell rang the two of them walked out of school together, heading in the general direction of their respective houses, talking all the while. After they'd gotten a few blocks from school, Elle stopped and turned towards Jeff, looking at him for a moment and then glancing down.

"Elizabeth..." He started to say, but she cut him off.

“Did you mean what you said earlier?” She asked, so softly he could barely hear her.

Jeff nodded and took a step closer, resting his hand on her arm. “Every word, Elizabeth. You looked like you really, really needed a friend. That’s all there is to it. I don’t like seeing people going back to where I was, and that look in your eyes...” Jeff shuddered slightly just thinking about it. “Well, let’s just say it wasn’t something I want to see.”

Elizabeth sighed softly and looked down at the sidewalk again, trying to keep herself under control. “When I asked what you wanted. . . Did you. . . Did you really mean what you said?”

“Elizabeth... I meant every word. I don’t want anything from you. I’m not asking you for anything. I’m just trying to offer you something I thought you might be missing right now. . . A friend. I don’t know what you’re so scared of, but. . . I’m no good at this.” Jeff sighed, shaking his head and trying to keep the tear out of his eye. “I’ve never been good at making friends, Elizabeth. But there’s something about you. . . Something extraordinary. I can’t put my finger on it, but. . . I want to get to know you.”

Elizabeth sighed and nodded. “I’m not used to this. It’s been so long since I made a friend, I don’t even remember how to anymore. . .”

“Well then, how about we both figure it out as we go along?” Jeff said, smiling and looking into her eyes. Elizabeth smiled back.

“I guess I can do that. . . Or try to, at least.”

Before Elle split off to walk the two blocks back to her house she asked Jeff what time he normally walked to school.

“It depends,” he replied, “on how late I’m running. I’m not a morning person. Usually I rush out of the house in just enough time to make the first bell... How come?”

“Because. . . If you don’t mind, I’d like to walk in with you tomorrow.” Elizabeth whispered, glancing at Jeff with a look that nearly made him break into tears. It was like she

was so desperate for the attention that she'd crack if he said no.

"I'd like that. Should I meet you at your house?"

"Nah, no need... I'll meet you right here -- does 7:30 sound alright?" She replied, her voice catching briefly as she spoke. Just the thought of him knowing exactly where she lived - - or worse yet, meeting Randy -- terrified her. The thought alone was enough to make her shiver in fright.

"Okay. I'll see you here then," Jeff replied, taking a deep breath and looking around. It was obvious that Elizabeth was trying to keep him from seeing where she lived, and that worried him. He sighed and looked back at her, trying to decide how to say what he desperately wanted to. Finally he got up the courage to ask simply:

"Are you going to be alright, Elizabeth?"

Jeff couldn't believe he'd actually asked it. All day he'd been dancing around the topic - - it was clear to both of them that something was wrong, but they weren't speaking of it; and there he went, asking the big question.

Elle snapped her head up and drew a slight breath. For the first time in longer than she could remember, someone was actually asking and, she could tell, genuinely cared about how she answered. Could she do it? What would happen if she said no? Would that really be the end of her hell? No. She knew that wouldn't happen... But, what if? Could she tell him? Was she strong enough to do that, to open up like that to someone? Would he really be willing to do something to help her? *Could* he do anything to help her? Could anyone?

She stood there for a minute, not saying anything, just looking at the boy in front of her. This boy, who she'd been laughing at a few short hours ago, and who was now asking her the question she'd been waiting to hear for ages.

She waited so long to respond that Jeff would have said something, just to be sure she was still with it, but he could see the turmoil on her face. The battle in her soul was reflected in her eyes. He could see the war within her, the struggle of her emotions in the depths of her green eyes. Eyes that were even now beginning to grow cloudy with tears from the weight of

that struggle inside her.

Those eyes, Jeff thought, looking into their misty green depths. There was something about them that just drew him in. He couldn't help but think that he could get lost in those eyes.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, Elle took a deep breath and sighed, looking up at him with an expression that he couldn't fathom, as she opened her mouth to speak.