

Chapter 4

"I'll be fine," she replied, almost in a whisper. And then, louder, "But call me Elle, please? Only my fa... Well, nobody really calls me Elizabeth."

Jeff nodded and set down his backpack, pulling out a notebook and tearing off a piece of paper. He scribbled something on it quickly and folded it over.

"Alright. . . If you need anything Elle, here's my phone number. You can call anytime."

Elle smiled and nodded softly, wondering again why this guy wanted anything to do with her. "Thank you," she said softly.

They turned and walked their separate ways. Jeff heading the two blocks back to his mother and sister, his "normal" family life, while Elle walked the blocks back to her "home", such as it was.

Not for the first time, she wished she were with her mom.

Jeff watched her walk away with a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. He was afraid. He was afraid of many things, he realized on his walk home. He was afraid of seeing that darkness in Elle's eyes again. He was afraid of what might happen to her. He was afraid that come tomorrow morning the bitchy, *I'd rather slug you than speak to you* Elizabeth would be back. He was afraid that he wouldn't get the chance to find out what it was that was drawing him to her so. Most of all, though, he was afraid of the feelings he seemed to be developing. He wasn't used to these kinds of feelings, and that scared him most of all.

So, Jeff did what he always did when he was scared and confused. He

went home, said a quick hello to his sister, and shut himself up in his room. Then he turned on his stereo, put in one of his mix CDs and hit play. The sounds of Pam Tillis' "In Between Dances" floated out of his speakers as he sat down with his favorite fountain pen and his journal and started writing. As usual, he poured his soul out into his journal. Without the little leather-bound books he had stashed in the bottom of his bookshelf he would have gone crazy for sure. They were filled with all sorts of his writings. Everything from diary entries to essays to poems were tucked away between the pages of the books. He'd been journalling for at least 5 years, and had quite a good stack of volumes tucked away, volumes that no one would ever get to see. There were some things in his journals that he would never share with anyone -- they were just too personal. Today's entry would be one of those.

I don't know what it is about her, but I can't seem to stay away. The entire time I was walking home from school with her I couldn't stop thinking about her. When I asked her if she was alright it seemed like she really wanted to say something, but she didn't. I don't know what to make of it. And of course she could go right back to being evil miss asskicker tomorrow morning, and I'll never know anything. I don't know why I care about her at all, but... I do. Why the hell does the first girl that I have any interest in getting to know have to be the one that can tear me to shreds without thinking twice about it?

By the time Jeff's mother got home and started to prepare dinner he'd written two full pages, just thinking on paper. Jeff looked at his mother when he went down for dinner and thought about how glad he was to have her to talk to. He walked over and gave her a hug.

"What was that for?" she asked, surprised. It wasn't that getting a hug from her son was especially unusual, he just didn't usually come up and do it out of the blue for no reason.

“Just because... I just wanted you to know how glad I am to have you here,” Jeff said quietly.

Katie Andrews hugged her son back, all the while wondering what had brought this on today; Jeff wasn't saying anything more however, and she was loathe to pry about it. She'd finally realized not that long ago that her relationship with her only son would be a lot smoother if she let him do his own thing and just made sure he knew she was always there for him. When she was constantly trying to know every little thing, and be a part of all of it, their relationship suffered. Ever since she'd eased off some and let him start finding his own way they'd grown closer, and friendlier. And she would much rather have that than the constant fighting that she saw between many teenagers and their parents nowadays.

* * * * *

For her part, Elle stopped a block closer to her house and, once she was sure she was out of Jeff's sight, sat down on a bench in the park, resting her head in her hands. “Why couldn't I tell him?” She asked herself. She had desperately wanted to cry out for help, but just couldn't make herself do it.

That's when the tears started. Long, racking sobs that came from someplace deep inside. The kind of sobs that Elle hadn't known since her mother had died. She couldn't understand what was happening inside her. She didn't want to live like this anymore. She had *wanted* to tell Jeff just now, but the words just wouldn't come. Once again, she felt trapped. Trapped in the life that she was living. She fingered the slip of notebook paper in her pocket with Jeff's phone number on it, thinking seriously about walking to a pay phone and calling him, but she didn't.

Instead she just sat for there for another few minutes, waiting as her tears

slowed and finally stopped. Only then did she stand up, set her jaw, and head off for her house. Elle hoped Randy was gone, but she didn't really believe she would get that lucky.

She was right.

That night was another rough one for Elle. Randy was home, and he'd gotten money for more booze, which was always a bad combination. At least his friends weren't over tonight. She shuddered just remembering it. Randy alone she could handle; she'd been dealing with him for long enough that it didn't really matter anymore. So, he beat her. Big deal. She could usually hide the bruises just fine, nobody ever noticed them. By now she hardly even noticed it anymore. And as for the rest... Well, it was just her life. She sighed.

By the time Elizabeth finally cried herself to sleep around 2 a.m. she knew that she would talk to Jeff. It wasn't a question of if anymore -- just when. Before falling asleep she set her alarm clock for 6 a.m. She'd need the extra time to cover up the bruises this time, she thought sarcastically. Then, mercifully, she fell into a deep sleep.

* * * * *

Jeff was having a restless night as well. After dinner he'd gone back upstairs to work on his homework, but he was distracted. He found himself thinking back to his conversations with Elle, replaying them in his head and trying to figure out the pieces to this puzzle. He was sure that there was something going on there -- there just had to be. Something was tearing the girl apart, and he couldn't help but feel like he should be able to figure out what it was. There was some piece that he was missing, he thought, and he didn't want to be. He hated feeling helpless -- and right now, that was a perfect description for the way he felt. Helpless. He should be doing something to help her, but Jeff didn't have

the foggiest idea what. The little bit of homework that he had left to finish should normally only have taken him forty-five minutes, or maybe an hour at the most. Tonight it took him almost two hours, he was so distracted.

The rest of the night didn't get much better. He tried to read for a while, but couldn't bring himself to get into either of the books he was working on. That was unusual. Jeff almost always had at least two books going at once, and he did that mostly for times like this -- moments where he couldn't quite get his mind around one or the other. Usually one of them was something lighter that didn't involve too much thought. At the moment, besides his books for school, he was reading the most recent Tom Clancy book, as well as James Michener's Alaska.

Right then, however, he couldn't get into either of them. Finally, after half an hour of trying to force himself to get through Clancy or Michener, he gave up and grabbed a copy of The Color of Magic that had been sitting on his bookshelf for some time. One of his friends, who was big into all kinds of fantasy novels, had recommended it a year or so ago, and it'd been sitting on his shelf ever since. Fantasy, especially the humorous kind, wasn't one of his preferred types of reading. But at the moment it was just what the doctor ordered. He managed to get into it, mostly because it was so strange that it had him shaking his head every few minutes.

"A world supported by four elephants standing on a turtle? And I thought my life was crazy," Jeff thought.

He finally fell asleep around midnight, after tossing and turning in bed for what seemed like hours. It wasn't a restful sleep, though. He kept waking up in a cold sweat every hour or so, worrying about Elle. When he did get to sleep the "dreams" he had nearly caused him to scream out in fright. By the time he decided to get up for good at half-past six his nightshirt and sheets were soaked through from sweat. He'd actually been awake since 4 a.m., when an especially

nightmarish dream caused him to bang his arm on the nightstand and woke him. Normally Jeff didn't remember his dreams, but this one was so horrific that he doubted he could ever forget it. He shuddered just thinking about it.

He thought about writing it down in his journal, but decided this was one experience that he didn't want to remember. He took his shower and got dressed, trying to keep his mind off what he was feared was going on a few streets over.

* * * * *

Except that Jeff was wrong. The only thing going on a few streets over was a hurried session with a makeup mirror.

Elle had woken up before her alarm went off at six, just to make sure that it wouldn't wake Randy. He was out cold, and would probably sleep for quite a while after the amount he'd drank the night before. Even so, she didn't want to take the chance of her alarm waking him, leaving him both hung-over *and* in a bad mood. She took a quick shower and then sat down at the mirror to do her makeup. She knew it would take her a while to cover up the bruises today.

An hour later, she was finished. She was wearing enough makeup to surprise even a veteran stage actor, but it didn't look like it. What it *did* look like, however, was that she didn't have any bruises on her face. That was what she was aiming for. She grabbed an outfit out of her closet and winced as she started getting dressed. She gave up on her bra after she almost screamed when the straps touched the bruises on her shoulders. "At least my shirt will hide those," she thought. Putting on her shirt still made her wince, but at least this pain was tolerable. She grabbed a quick breakfast and picked up her books, walking out the door a few minutes before 7:15. It was better to be waiting around outside in the cold than it was to take the chance of waiting around at home and having Randy wake up.

Elle walked to the spot where she was going to meet Jeff slowly, deep in thought. She was trying to decide whether or not to say anything to him. In her heart, she knew she wanted to tell him -- she wanted *someone* to get her out of this nightmare, but she knew that wasn't likely to happen. She'd tried telling someone once before. After the first night, she went to a teacher at school and talked to her. Elle managed to get out that Randy was hitting her, but she couldn't bring herself to say the rest. The teacher, at least, took her seriously, and went to the principal. However, nothing more ever came of it. Nobody ever came to visit the house; Elizabeth wasn't even referred to the school counselor. It was like everyone just forgot about it -- or didn't care.

It was shortly after that that she started to change. The first time she got into a fight, the principal didn't do anything, he just wrote it off to the stress of adjusting to her mother's dying. The second time, he called her into the office to talk with her. It wasn't until she broke a boy's nose - for no reason - that he took any real action. And even that wasn't much: he referred her to the school psychologist. After three sessions where the doctor just asked about how she felt about her mom and why she was fighting in school -- and where she didn't really say anything of substance -- she quit going. The shrink wrote it up as problems adjusting to losing her mother and recommended that she be given some latitude and time. She didn't bother opening her mouth to anyone else after that. By the end of middle school her grades had gone from A's and B's to C's and D's, and she was routinely picking fights and causing other mischief.

That's how she was known when she started high school: as a troublemaker and a bully, and things didn't get any better during her freshman year. Elle spent a lot of time cutting class and just generally being a pain in the ass to anyone that got in her way, and a few people that didn't. She fell in with a group of troublemakers and spent most of her days either high on something-or-other or drunk, sometimes both. It wasn't until January that the shit really hit the

fan, though. She was caught trying to break into the chemistry storage room. She was just trying to steal a few chemicals; not to damage the school or hurt anyone like the administration claimed. The plan was just to grab some stuff and hopefully find a better way to get high. Unfortunately, the Dean didn't care what the reason was. They may not have done anything to stop her back in middle school, but this was high school. It was bad enough that she was already one of the class bullies. She was already spending most every afternoon in detention, either because of the fights or the vandalism or the cutting classes. Things like this, though, "Absolutely can't be tolerated," he'd said. He suspended her for a week and called home.

Fortunately, Randy wasn't home when he called; or at least, he wasn't answering the phone. Unfortunately, he *did* get the certified letter, and so he made sure that she -- and he -- were both home for the whole week. By the end of the week, Elizabeth had absolutely decided one thing: she was going to be *much* more careful not to get caught in the future. For his part, Randy was happy to tell her, "You can get suspended any time you want."

Needless to say, that convinced her to never let herself get suspended again, even if nothing else had.

By this point, she was just about at the corner where she'd agreed to meet Jeff and no closer to deciding what to say or do. What she didn't realize, of course, was that it would soon be out of her control.

Jeff walked up to the corner a few minutes before 7:30, keeping his fingers crossed that she at least showed up. He wasn't disappointed. As he crossed the street a block up he saw her standing there, waiting. His heart started beating faster, hoping that she was in a good mood and thinking that maybe he'd be able to do something to help. As he reached her, though, she turned and started walking towards school.

Jeff was confused. She was waiting there for him, but as soon as he'd gotten close enough to strike up a conversation she turned away. He hurried to keep up, and as he got beside her he started talking.

"Hi."

"Hi," Elle said quietly, not breaking her stride.

"I'm glad you decided to wait for me. . . I wasn't sure you would be here this morning."

Elle just sighed, looking over at Jeff. "I said I would," she replied, bumping his arm with hers and noticing him flinch.

"What happened?" She asked quickly, wondering if he might actually be able to understand her life.

"Ohh, nothing. I just bumped my arm last night getting out of bed," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "No big deal, just me being clumsy." He laughed softly and rubbed his arm. Of course, Jeff had no way of knowing that such a totally innocuous comment, in his eyes, might not be seen the same way by Elizabeth. He didn't think twice about it, other than to crack a joke -- which did make her smile a little, so he achieved his goal.

Elizabeth, of course, didn't hear a totally innocent statement. She heard the same excuse that she'd used for so long, and it made her stop and think a little. She didn't think Jeff was living with the same kind of hell she was -- not with the way he'd talked about his mom and sister the day before -- but nobody seemed to pick up on what she was living with, so maybe it was harder to tell than she thought. Just the same, though, she heard the excuse that she herself

had used so many times, and it started her wondering... What if Jeff *did* understand?

She was interrupted from this train of thought by Jeff saying something. She'd heard his voice, but she realized that she didn't have any idea what he had said.

Elle shook her head and looked down. "I'm sorry Jeff... I was thinking about something, what did you say?" she asked.

"It's okay... I just asked if you had an okay night." Jeff repeated, a look of concern showing in his eyes.

Elizabeth sighed. She was still working out what to think about Jeff, and especially what he'd said, in her mind, so her brain wasn't entirely on what he was asking. This time she did hear the question, but because she was thinking about other things at the same time, she didn't really think about either the question or her answer before she replied. It was because of that inattention that she didn't realize what was happening until the words were out of her mouth.

"It was alright I guess..." She said, very matter-of-factly. "I've had much worse. At least Randy was al..." was as far as she'd gotten when her brain caught up to her mouth and she realized what she was about to say. She stopped dead in her tracks, fixing Jeff in a stare that would've turned most people to stone in a heartbeat.

He'd stopped walking as she started to answer the question. It was obvious to him that she wasn't really thinking about the answer. The tone of her voice as she'd started to reply was so calm and routine that for a moment he'd thought he was imagining things, but then she started talking about having had much worse and the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. He didn't even have

time to finish processing the last bit of what she'd said when he realized just how angry the look she was throwing in his direction was.

He looked up at her and blinked, a bit surprised at both her statement and the vehemence of her expression. She was glaring daggers at him, and at first he couldn't figure out why. Then he realized what she'd said and a light clicked on in his mind. Randy must be her stepfather... and clearly he had something to do with why her night was so bad. He got a cold feeling in the pit of his stomach and tried to think of a way to get Elle to relax a little.

"Elle..." he started to say, but was interrupted when she grabbed his arm tightly.

"Don't say a word," she said intensely, squeezing his arm quickly. "Whatever you think you heard, you don't know shit... not about me, and not about my life, so don't say a fucking word." She was trying desperately to get him to forget what she said, but she was doing it by trying to make him afraid of her, throwing all of her anger and fear and shame at him, and she hadn't yet realized that it wasn't going to work.

Jeff just shook his head, looking at the furious girl in front of him. "Elle, whatever it is, it's not your fault. I'm not going to say anything to anyone, but don't try and take my head off because you said something you didn't plan on. I told you before, you seem like you need a friend. Talk to me, what's wrong?" he said quietly, grabbing the hand that was holding his arm and looking at her.

"What makes you think anything is wrong?" She shot back at him, still looking rather pissed off.

Jeff sighed and shook his head again. Clearly she didn't want to tell him anything right now, and he didn't want to take the chance of pissing her off even

more and having her quit talking to him -- or worse yet, having her really hurt him. He couldn't forget that this girl who he was trying to become friends with, and who was standing here in front of him looking like she was about to explode, was known as one of the toughest bullies in the school. According to everything he'd heard, she'd come close to sending one kid to the hospital, just because he looked at her wrong. It wouldn't do for him to become her next victim.

He didn't think it would come to that, though. No matter how angry and upset she looked, he didn't think she would hit him. Not right now at least. He didn't see that stare in her eyes, the one he'd seen when she was heading for the desk, or up in the stairwell when he touched her shoulder. Even without knowing the reason for it, without knowing anything about her, he knew that look was trouble. That was the look of someone about to go over the edge. When they were up on the stairs he wasn't even sure that she'd recognized him, at first. He didn't see that look in her eyes now, though. What he saw, when he looked, was fury and fear, and something else that he couldn't put a label on. But it wasn't rage. It didn't look like she was about to hit him. Not to mention that, although she was still holding his arm uncomfortably tightly, she hadn't even tried to remove her other hand from his.

What Jeff *wanted* to do was to shake her until she got it through her head that he just wanted to help her, wanted to get to know her better... but he didn't. What he did instead was to simply say, "When you want to talk, Elle, I'm here. I want to try and help, if I can. I want to be your friend."

Elle shook her head and sighed, not trusting herself to say anything at the moment. She was saved from having to when Jeff spoke up again.

"If we don't get going, we're going to be late to school, and that won't help either of our lives."

She nodded and walked alongside as Jeff started walking towards school again, finally releasing her grip on his arm but still not letting go of his hand.

They walked the next block or two in silence, neither really wanting to say anything. Jeff was trying to come up with a way to get it across to her that he didn't want to fight with her, but wasn't having too much luck. In the meantime, however, Elizabeth was thinking about everything.

She found her mind wandering back to where it had been, wondering if it might just be possible that Jeff *would* understand, at least a little bit. She couldn't make up her mind, but decided that it just might be worth it to take a bit of a chance, at least.

Before they got too close to school she reached out and touched Jeff's shoulder, looking up at him.

"I shouldn't have snapped at you like that," she said softly. "It wasn't right, you didn't do anything wrong. I'm... I'm sorry." By this point she was practically whispering, and almost in tears.

"It's okay, Elle." Jeff replied. "But if you want to talk about it, I'm here, okay?"

She looked around and noticed that they were almost to school. "Okay, but we're almost at school now, and I don't want to make you late. Will you wait for me after school? I think I just need to... to be around a friend, right now."

"Of course I will. Are you going to be at the office again this afternoon?"

"I don't know, I hadn't thought about it. I might be, I guess... It's a better waste of time than study hall, for sure."

"Want me to talk to Dr. Smith about it?"

"Nah, I'll ask him myself... I need to talk to him today anyways."

"Okay. Are you alright this morning, Elle? Do you need... well... I don't even know what you might need... Do you need anything, I guess?" Jeff said softly, resting his hand very lightly on her shoulder and looking into her eyes. What he saw there wasn't the look of anger from a few minutes ago, nor was it a look of terror that he was half afraid of -- and half expecting. What he saw was a look he couldn't explain or put words to; it was the same one that had been burning under the anger before that he couldn't recognize. It definitely wasn't a look of terror, though. Fear, maybe, but not terror.

"I'm better than I have been in a while, I think," she responded quietly, smiling slightly. "I'd forgotten what it was like to have a friend." she continued even more softly, squeezing Jeff's hand and starting walking again..

They walked the last couple of blocks to school quickly, talking about their schedules and trading notes on teachers that they had, and a few that they wished they had. He'd expected that she might split off before they got to campus, so that people didn't see them walking in together, but she either didn't think about it or she didn't care, because they kept walking and talking until they split off at the main hallway to go to their lockers. She did let go of his hand before they got to campus, but that was it. Jeff was rather surprised that he didn't get any comments from people. Elizabeth was apparently pretty well known as a troublemaker and a bitch, and he certainly wasn't the kind of guy that usually hung around with girls like that; for that matter, he wasn't the kind of guy that usually hung around with girls, period. Most of his time he spent by himself with a book or notebook. Or, if not that, then with one of his very few friends -- almost all of whom were guys, and were nearly as quiet and shy as he was. He didn't

really think about it much, but when he did, he had to admit that he would probably consider himself a geek, and so he figured he'd really hear about it for walking in with someone like Elle.

He didn't hear any comments however, which was a pleasant surprise. A few of the guys he knew gave him some really strange looks when they saw Elle walking away from him, though. He just shrugged as he collected his books and walked off to his homeroom class, trying to wrap his mind around everything that had gone on already this morning.

When he first met up with Elle that morning, she seemed like she barely wanted to talk to him. Then she seemingly let something slip and looked ready to kill him. Then she switched to being as nice as could be... It was a strange contradiction to Jeff, and in the back of his mind he was still trying to figure out where she was going with what she'd said.

Jeff's morning seemed to drag on. He was fairly distracted in his classes and had a hard time focusing enough to take his Algebra quiz during first period. If that wasn't bad enough, he was basically hopeless in Earth Science, which was a class he was already having a rough time in. He was lucky his friend Mark was in that class with him, and took good notes, because he probably wouldn't remember anything the teacher had said today. By the time he made it to the deans' office during lunch, he was totally off-balance.

* * * * *