

Chapter 2

“Elle. Earth to Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth looked up, briefly wondering where she was. The hand on her shoulder made her flinch, and caused her pulse to quicken. She tensed, then noticed the chemistry lab, and allowed herself to relax.

“What’s wrong with you today, Elle? You’ve been spacing out the whole class, even more than usual I mean.”

“Nothing, Katie,” she snapped. “What is it we’re supposed to be doing here?”

Katie proceeded to explain the experiment to Elle - again - and they started to work through it. Just before adding the final chemicals, Mrs. Walker called Katie up to her desk.

“I can do this,” Elizabeth thought to herself, quickly glancing over the instruction sheet again for what she had to do next. Add 50mL of water to the mix, heat, and we’re set. Then I can get out of here. Elle didn’t go to classes much normally, and especially not chemistry. It was too confusing, and she didn’t care what the teachers thought of her. The only thing chemistry was good for as far as she was concerned was being able to swipe some chemicals to sell, or better yet, to make something to get high with. Unfortunately, since she rarely made it to class, she’d never learned the rules about how to combine the different chemicals safely; and since Katie always did the work, she didn’t care.

Katie... Elle shook her head slightly, thinking about her only friend. Well, as close to a friend as she had anyways. They’d known each other since 4th grade, and had been in at least one class together ever since. Katie was the only person Elle trusted since her mother had died, and even she didn’t know about the older girl’s life at home. Talk about a strange pair, though. The two girls were almost total opposites, in every way. Where Elle was tall and skinny, Katie was short and, if not quite fat, then definitely well rounded. Katie had all the curves, while Elle barely had any. And Katie was one of the smartest girls in the school -- and had been since 4th grade. She was among the top 5 students in her class - and had a fighting chance at graduating valedictorian, if she wanted it. Elle on the other hand would be lucky to graduate at all. Once again she had to wonder what the shorter girl saw in her. She

hadn't ever been especially nice to Katie, but it hadn't scared her off like it did most everyone else in the school.

All these thoughts ran through Elle's head as she filled the pyrex measuring cup with 50mL of water and set the beaker of acid up on the bunsen burner, turning the gas on and adjusting it to a light flame. She let it heat for a moment, and then began pouring the water into the beaker of acid. Immediately it started to bubble and boil over. "Oh shit." Elle muttered, as the chemical reaction started in earnest. She stood at the lab table, just staring down at the beaker as the reaction got more and more energetic. Just then Mrs. Walker glanced up from her desk and saw what was happening, jumping to her feet and rushing across the room, pushing students out of her way as she ran.

"Elizabeth, GET BACK! NOW! MOVE!" The teacher shouted, reaching the lab table and pushing her aside, grabbing for the beaker. She held it in one hand, as far in front of her as she could, as she rushed to the fume hood. She made it to the hood barely a second before the mixture flashed over in a large puff of steam and smoke. The whole class was standing, staring at Elle in shock.

"Elizabeth Miller..." Mrs. Walker started, "at my desk, NOW! The rest of you, go back to your work."

"I should have known you wouldn't be paying attention again, Ms. Miller. Do you realize you could've killed yourself, or even all of us, if the chemicals were just a little bit different? That's twice already this term that you've done something like this, and it's barely even 3 months in. One more mistake like this and I'll have to drop you from the class and fail you. For now though, you're heading to the deans office; I don't want you destroying anything else in here today. Get going," the teacher said, handing her a hall pass to the office.

She grabbed her bag and walked out of the classroom, barely stopping to cast a look at Katie over her shoulder on her way out the door, trying to ignore the snickers of her classmates. "Here we go again," she thought, heading towards the deans office where she seemed to spend so much of her time.

"Excuse me, where do you think you're going?"

Elle looked up, startled, to see a teacher standing in front of her, looking dour.

"Ahh, Miss Miller, I should have known... Going to the deans office again I imagine?"

The tall girl felt her face flush red, and began to feel hot. What right did this teacher have to harass her? She had a damned hall pass, it wasn't any of this old bitch's business where she was going...

"Well, go ahead, get moving... I'm sure the dean doesn't have all day." The old woman said, walking off down the hall.

Elle just seethed. She headed off down the hall to the office, but her eyes flashed with anger. That was the last thing she needed today, a run in with yet another damned teacher, she thought, turning to open the door to the cramped office suite where all four deans plus security had their offices.

"Oops, excuse me."

She glared at the kid who had just ran into her, knocking her books to the ground. Obviously, he hadn't been watching where he was walking. It was the last straw. Elle towered over him by at least four inches, and he looked skinny as a twig. She didn't recognize the boy.

"Excuse you? There's no excuse for you, asshole! Don't you know how to open your eyes when you walk?!?" Elle was nearly shouting now, and the boy was shaking in fear. She grabbed him by the collar and pulled him towards her, whispering in his ear, "If you ever run into me or touch me again, kid, I'll break you in half! You understand?" She growled at him, putting just enough pressure on his neck to make him squirm

"Y...Ye...yes... I... I understand." The boy tried to force the words out but had trouble as he was shaking so badly. He was obviously terrified at the sight of this girl.

Elle just chuckled, her eyes shining with laughter. She let go of the boy's collar suddenly, watching him collapse to the ground and scurry around gathering her textbooks for her.

"Have a nice day," Elle chuckled to him with a glint in her eye as she turned to open the door to the cramped office suite where the deans were . She took a deep breath and thought to herself "here we go again," as she pulled open the door and walked in to the secretaries outer office. The women groaned when they saw her.

"You again, Elizabeth? You might as well go right back, Dean Smith is waiting for you," said Mrs. Thomas, one of the secretaries in the office.

Elle just grunted and trudged back down the short hallway into her deans office, a place where she'd already spent a major chunk of her highschool career. It was, oddly enough, one of the very few places she felt anything resembling safe. At least Dr. Smith had never hurt her when she hadn't deserved it. She walked in to his office with an uncaring expression on her face, and a look even more than her usual numbness in her eyes. Nothing he could do today would faze her.

"Elizabeth... Again in Chemistry? You have got to start paying more attention, you could have seriously injured yourself this time..." Dr. Smith started to say, motioning the student to a seat in front of his cluttered desk while he finished writing on an official-looking form at the top of a pile. When he finally glanced up his words died in his throat, and he did a double-take. Something in the way the girl was looking made every hair on the back of the experienced educator's neck stand on end. In almost 30 years of teaching he'd only rarely gotten such a feeling, and he'd learned long ago to pay attention when he did.

"Elizabeth, are you alright?" He asked, with genuine concern in his voice.

Very slowly, almost like she didn't have the energy to care, Elle turned her head and looked at her dean, not meeting his eyes, while her legs started to tremble.

"I'm fine, Dr. Smith. I just wasn't paying attention and I guess I screwed up the experiment. What else is new, right?" she said, willing herself to stop shaking and feeling every beat of her pulse in her forehead. "So what is it this time, another Saturday detention?" A cold sweat broke out on the back of Elle's neck as she heard herself saying this, realizing how unhappy Randy would be if she had to ask him to take her to school at 8am Saturday morning. "Oh well," she thought. "I can always just blow it off, it wouldn't be the first time..."

She was saved from having to worry further about that when the balding man shook his head.

“No, not this time... I think you learned your lesson already for this mistake. I don't see any reason to put you in detention... No doubt holding that beaker in your hands got the message across stronger than a detention will,” he said, looking at her with concern. “Seriously, Elizabeth, are you okay from that? It had to be quite a shock... Do you want me to send you to the nurse, or the counselor?”

“Really, I told you Dean Smith, I'm fine. It's nothing.”

“Very well,” he said, shaking his head slightly. “I certainly can't send you back to chemistry now. You can go to study hall for the rest of this period and then to your next class, or you can stay and help out around the office until then. I could use some extra help running notes this period, but whichever you want to do is fine.

Elle glanced down thoughtfully, trying to decide which option would give her the best likelihood of being able to sneak off and have a cigarette, if not something stronger; when she looked up Dr. Smith was looking at her expectantly. “I guess I'll help out around the office, sir.” She said softly.

“Great. I'll have one of the other volunteers come back and show you how everything works, and then you can help get the attendance sheets collected. If there's time afterwards I may have you deliver a few notes for me. If you need to go to the nurse just let me know and I'll give you a pass.” He pressed a button on his telephone and Mrs. Thomas's voice came across the intercom.

“Yes, sir? Do you need something?”

“If you could send Jeff back please, Mrs. Thomas, I would appreciate it. I need him to show Miss Miller around the office, she's going to be volunteering this period. I thought she could help collect the attendance sheets, and then possibly run some notes for me.

“Very well, he's on his way back.” The secretary said, just a moment before the

speakerphone shut off with a soft 'click'. A second later there was a quiet knock from the doorway.

"Come on in Jeff," Dr. Smith called out through the doorway. "I need you to show Miss Miller around the office, and get her started on running the attendance sheets. She's volunteering with us today."

Elle glanced at the new boy out of the corner of her eyes and quickly sized him up. "Damn," she thought, "this guy is scrawny." His brown hair sat atop his head in an almost-but-not-quite completely unruly mass. His hair hung down nearly to his eyebrows, and it was clear he didn't do much to take care of it. She wouldn't have been surprised if it hadn't seen shampoo in the better part of 3 days. He was tall and skinny, and she would have been shocked if he'd had the muscles to lift her backpack. The most striking thing, though, were his glasses. Not just that he wore them - which was bad enough in Elle's book - but the frames that he wore were even more frightening. Nothing like the thin, wire frames that were so fashionable these days. These were thick, brown plastic frames - frames that would seem more at home on an army recruit than a high school student. And in case that wasn't bad enough, these glasses were THICK. It seems the days of the cracks about kids wearing Coke bottles for glasses weren't quite dead after all. Elle had never seen a true glass bottle of the cola, but that didn't matter. She'd heard they existed, and she'd heard "friends" make the references before, when they'd see geeks with lenses so thick you could probably see Mars with them. His entire appearance just screamed "Geek" to anyone that bothered to look -- "Not that many people would bother," Elle thought to herself.

Elizabeth was in a lot of pain from last night still, not to mention more than a little bit shaken up from the incident in chemistry, and that fact was obvious as she got up to leave Dr. Smith's office. She stumbled as she stood up, her right leg deciding it didn't feel like supporting her very much. As her knee buckled under she collapsed, heading right into the sharp corner of the large wooden desk. Time slowed to a crawl as she scrambled to grab on to the arms of the chair -- to grab *anything* to stop her from falling, but it was too late. Her pain was throwing off her reaction time, and her momentum was throwing off her balance. She saw the corner of the desk coming up quickly, and briefly wondered if this might not be for the best anyways... maybe she could finally escape everything...

Just as that thought crossed her mind she felt herself pulled back by two scrawny

hands on her shoulders. And she flinched. Hard. And just as fast the hands were gone, and she was sitting back in the chair again, shaking. She blinked and looked around, trying to figure out what had happened. That's when she noticed Jeff standing there behind her, looking flushed and out of breath, his hands shaking almost as badly as her own were. She only glanced at him for a moment, but in that moment their eyes connected. She shivered, on top of her shaking. There was something about his eyes... Something she couldn't quite get a finger on, but it resonated with her. Just for the briefest of moments the expression in her own eyes softened. And then it was over, and the cold, hard stare was back, and she was pulling herself back together.

"What happened, Elizabeth? Are you okay?" Dr. Smith asked quickly, looking worried.

"I'm fine." She snapped, looking up at the dean. "I must have stood up wrong and tripped. I'm perfectly fine, I just need a minute to let it rest and I'll be out of your hair." She replied, with not a little bit of venom in her voice. She continued, before he had a chance to respond, "I don't need the nurse or anything, I'm just fine."

Dr. Smith just looked at her and shook his head slightly in wonder. He would never understand this girl, he thought to himself. "Are you okay, Jeff?" He said, looking at the other student in the room, who had stopped shaking now but who still looked a bit pale. "That was quick work, thank you," he continued.

Jeff just nodded at the man, not quite trusting his voice yet. He swallowed once, and then again, before opening his mouth to speak. "I'm fine sir, I was just surprised, that was all," he replied, looking nervous.

"Are you both sure you're up to working this period?" The dean asked, looking at Jeff and then Elizabeth.

Jeff just nodded and looked over at Elizabeth.

"Yeah, I'm fine," she said to her dean. "Might as well get this over with," she continued to herself, under her breath, too quietly for Dr. Smith to hear, but it was just loud enough for Jeff to have made out the words.

He glanced down at her, with an unreadable look in his eyes. "Are you ready to go?" He asked, his voice a mixture of harshness and quiet concern.

She looked up at him, trying to come up with a smart retort, but before she could think of anything to say he opened his mouth again.

"Do you think you can walk this time, or would you prefer I carry you?" He asked deadpan, with just the slightest hint of humor in his voice. The way he said it pulled Elle up short. She just glared back at him. Then she thought of this scrawny weakling carrying her, and that was enough to make her collapse into a fit of laughter. She laughed so hard it hurt, and the fit continued long enough that Dr. Smith started looking at her like she was losing her mind. Elle shook her head. "No, I think I can walk this time... and I don't think you could lift me up to save your soul."

"Was that a challenge?"

Elle chuckled and blinked. "Not hardly," was all she said, getting out of the seat and cautiously putting weight on her leg. She started heading for the door, limping slightly on her right leg, leaving Jeff behind her in the office. He followed her through the door into the outer office and stopped.

"Have you ever worked in the office here before?"

Elizabeth just stared at him, shaking her head and not saying a word. She still didn't entirely trust her voice.

"Okay, the first thing we need to do is collect the attendance cards from the classrooms, and run them down to the attendance office." He said. "Once that's done, we may need to run confirmation slips back to a few of the teachers, but usually not... Generally there isn't a whole lot to do after the attendance is done -- it's a good chance to get homework done. But then again, I'm betting that's not a major concern to you, huh?"

"How'd you ever guess?" She snapped back, turning to head out into the main hallway.

"We may want to stick together for this. You don't have a hall pass, and the teachers don't know you at all, so I'm not sure they'll give you the sheets..."

Elle nodded in agreement, pulling open the office door and heading out into the main hall. "Where do you usually start?"

"Usually I start upstairs on the other side, that way I can work my way back towards the office... not to mention take a break in the cafe for a few minutes if I get tired of walking." Jeff grinned lopsidedly and started walking towards cafeteria and fieldhouse. Looking over at Elle he saw her limping. "Do you want some help?" He asked, concern in his eyes. "You can lean on me if you need to. Would you rather take the elevator than the stairs?"

"No, I'm fine," she replied shortly, barely even looking up. She walked through the double doors into the cafeteria, with barely a glance at the teacher who was sitting in a chair in the middle of the hall, watching for people cutting classes or trying to sneak into the cafe.

If Elle would have noticed her, she would have realized that Ms. Michalski's eyes went wide seeing Jeff walking with her. She'd known Jeff since he transferred in to this school -- he went this way every day when he collected attendance sheets, and she was his homeroom teacher to boot, and she'd never seen him walking with a girl. Or even talking to one for that matter, outside of answering questions during class. She'd tried to get him to consider doing some tutoring, because he was one of the brightest students she'd seen come through the school in years, but he was just too shy. Talk about the definition of a wallflower. He was so obviously uncomfortable around most of his classmates that it hurt to watch. It wasn't that he was hopeless, he wasn't. He was just shy, and worse than that in high school, he was smart. And so he was an outcast. Not many friends in general, no close friends to speak of. One of the students that teachers loved. He did his work, asked good questions, and didn't cause trouble -- didn't make waves. Basically, he just existed.

But boy, she thought, glancing again at the two of them walking down the hallway, he knows how to pick them. That girl is more than a handful.

They walked around the cafeteria to the other side of the building in silence before either of them said anything.

“So, is the rumor true about chemistry?” Jeff asked, as they walked towards the staircase. “Did you actually almost blow up the school?”

Elle shrugged and shook her slightly. “Not quite. I don’t think I could have blown up the school with the chemicals we had in there. I wasn’t paying enough attention, I guess, and must have done something wrong. The next thing I know, Mrs. Walker is running up and pushing me out of the way, and then grabbing the beaker and throwing it under the fume hood. It didn’t really explode, not like a bomb or anything... It just went up in a big flash of steam or smoke or whatever. Then she started yelling at me and sent me to the deans’ office. Not much to tell, really.”

Jeff shook his head and chuckled quietly. “Ouch. That can’t be good for your grade.”

Elle just stared at him for a moment. “Do you really think I care that much about my grade?”

“Ehh... Good point...” Jeff mumbled, as they continued collecting the attendance sheets from the various classrooms. Occasionally he would stop to exchange a few words with some of the teachers, but mainly it was just the boring routine. Knock on the door. Get handed the attendance sheets -- green and white scan-tron forms, with the name of the class and teacher on the top, and a list of student’s names down the right side, followed by three columns of bubbles. Present. Tardy. Absent. Every form exactly the same, all the bubbles filled in neatly in pen or pencil.

“Borrr-rring,” Elle thought, but at least she didn’t have to think about it. Instead, she was thinking about anything but. She made a bit of small talk with Jeff, but for the most part, she was silent. She could tell he was trying to be nice, but she wasn’t interested. She didn’t want to talk, not really, not at the moment. First she started replaying the incident in chemistry in her mind, but the picture changed all of a sudden. In a flash, it wasn’t almost causing an explosion in the chemistry lab that she was remembering, but last night’s torment at home. Then it was the deans office. She saw herself falling towards the desk - and felt Jeff pull her back, again. She felt his hands on her shoulder and arm. Felt the pain when he touched the tender, bruised flesh on her shoulders. And then she was back to last night again.

She couldn't have known it of course, but while these thoughts were running through her mind, Jeff was getting more and more concerned. He could tell there was something wrong - very wrong, at least in his mind. He was trying to be nice at least, and even though they had almost nothing in common, he figured she normally would have been polite enough to at least pretend to care. Or to tell him to go fuck off. Or something. Instead, she was just standing there. For the past two or three minutes they'd been standing in the hallway at the top of the stairs. They were sort of talking, and then all of a sudden she went silent, and now she was just standing there, looking white as a sheet. And then he looked in her eyes, and something inside him screamed. What it was he couldn't know, but something turned to ice. There was something in those eyes... it wasn't like looking into the eyes of a high schooler. It was like... well... there was no way to explain it. Like looking through a window into hell itself. He didn't -- couldn't -- know what it was, not consciously at least, but something deep in his soul must have had some idea, because it turned to ice. He shivered, worse than he had even when he caught her from falling in the deans office, when he was terrified she'd break him in half for touching her. Then he remembered it; the look in her eyes as she was falling, and the look when he grabbed her to catch her.

And then she felt it again. She flinched again at the sharp jolt of pain when the hand came touched her skin, but this time that wasn't all she felt. This time she felt anchored somehow. It wasn't the shock of pain that pulled her back to the present, it was the feeling that she was somehow grounded all of a sudden. She blinked and shook her head, and was back in the hallway on the second floor of the school, with Jeff's hand on her shoulder, cold as ice. Elle looked at him, and saw that *look* in his eyes again. She still couldn't figure it out, but this time it wasn't quite as scary to her. She shuddered.

"Come on, come with me." Jeff said, in a tone of voice that didn't leave any room for debate, as he started heading down the stairs, one hand on the railing and the other on Elle's shoulder. They walked out into the hallway outside the west cafe, and kept walking until they were in the small enclosed courtyard, almost deserted at this time of the year. It was cold but not unbearable, and at this moment Elle wasn't likely to notice the temperature. Jeff moved his hand and motioned her towards the table, pulling out a chair. After a few moments of his not making any move to sit down, Elle realized that he was holding out the chair for her. She blinked and sat down, staring at him all the while, a small shiver running through her. She remembered the story she'd heard about one of the previous senior classes, putting the principal's car in the middle of the courtyard one day -- a courtyard that was totally

inaccessible to the outside. The only way to get the car in (or out) was to take the mirrors off and bring it through the school hallways. The thought made her smile a little, and Jeff looked at her strangely.

“Elizabeth,” he started to say, before she cut him off.

“Shh. Let’s just sit here a few minutes.” She said, resting her head on her hand and shaking slightly from the cold. Jeff stood up and put his jacket around her shoulders. It wasn’t much, but it was something... and the gesture of it warmed her more than the fabric ever could.

A single, lone tear slowly rolled down her cheek.